

Jack Racer

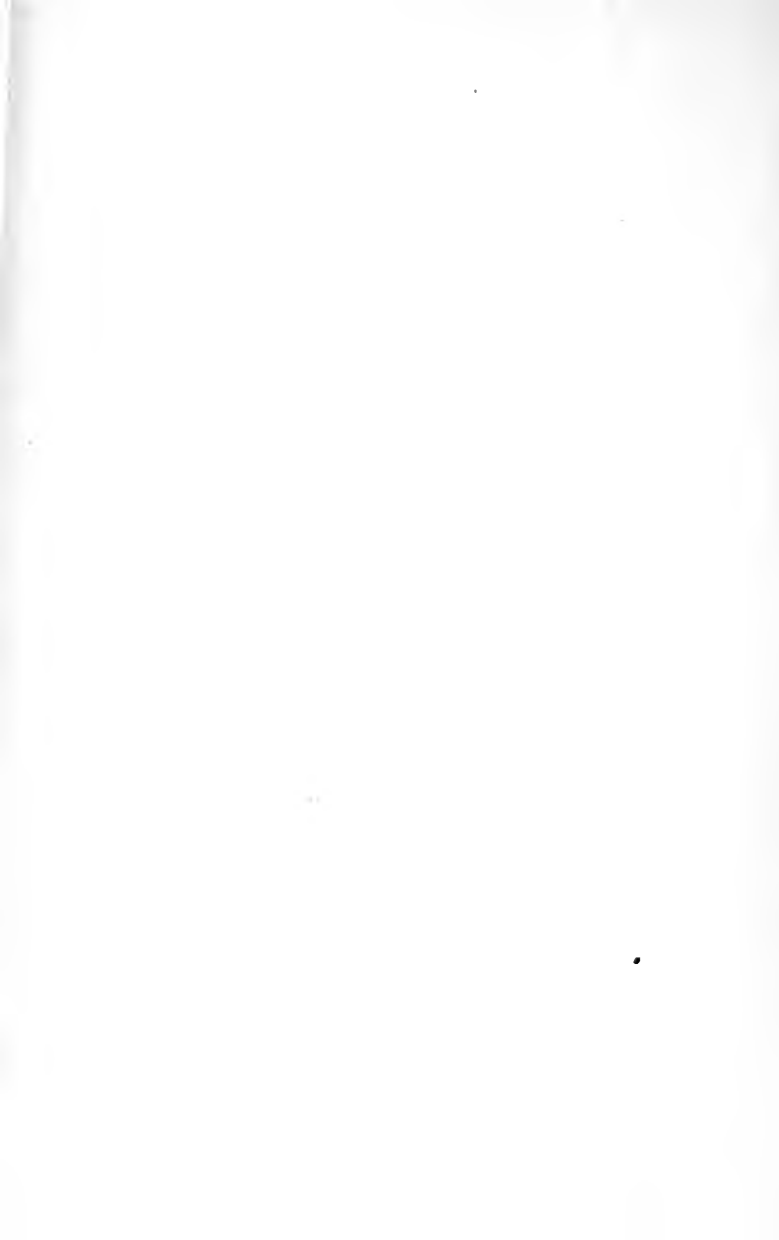
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JACK RACER



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By

HENRY SOMERVILLE



DECORATIONS BY ANNE GOLDTHWAITE



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NEW YORK

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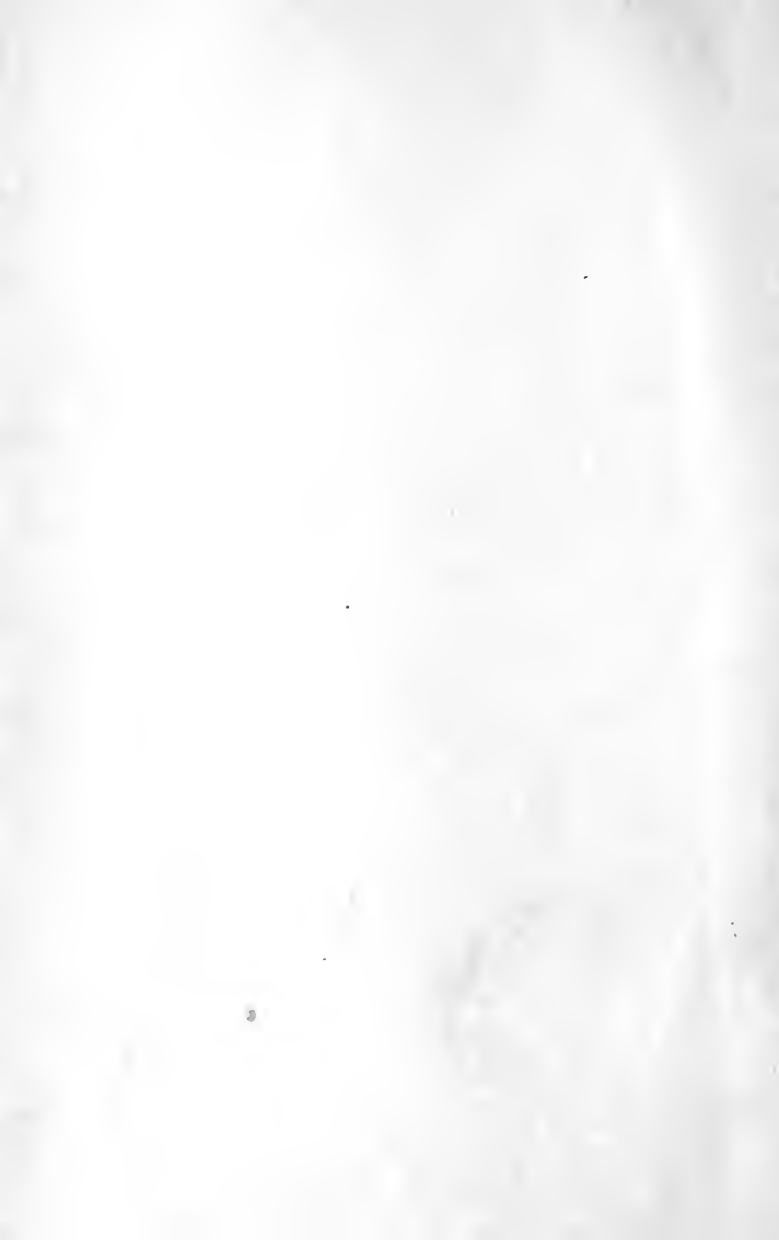
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To
The Memory
of
MY FATHER & MOTHER

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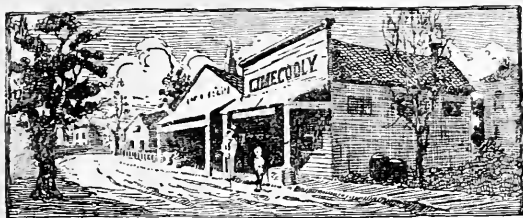
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CHAPTER ONE

JACK RACER

I

Jack's Curious Interest in the Campbell Household



EKIN had pronounced views on some subjects. These were not many, but they were held with great intensity, and all had reference to what in some circles is

called the conduct of life.

There was rarely more than one of these prominent. They were taken up *seriatim*, as the public speakers say, and, in time, became seasonable. Thus, about the time of cider making and stilling, in a quiet way, to save the overripe and unmarketable fruit, and before the fall rains set in, the temperance agitation began, taking sometimes the energetic form of

the crusade, and again, the more seductive methods of the Good Templars.

This usually ripened into a religious revival in winter, which in spring softened into musical conventions and strawberry festivals, none of which were reckoned as gayeties in Peking, all having some saving object in view. Notwithstanding, a great many outside matters were accomplished in this way, for which more worldly communities have to depend on more worldly methods. Not to take an interest in whatever was uppermost was to become a member of that vague, though large, body known as Antichrist. The case of such an one, however, was by no means hopeless. Old Jacob Kintzing, who made a good deal of cider publicly, and manufactured apple-jack and peach brandy privately, and during the temperance agitation was held to be a winebibber and corrupter of youth, was the mainstay of the winter revival. On the other hand, Squire Green, who led the crusade, at other seasons

was an ill-odor in the nostrils of Peking and unpleasantly spoken of as a whited sepulchre. There was always one exception. At all times and at all seasons, Jack Racer was regarded with unchanging disapproval. This was not because Jack did not take an interest in everything that went on; but because of what might be called the quality of Jack's interest. He was popularly supposed to be dissipated, from the odor of cardamom seeds he generally diffused,—cardamom seeds, in places of the size of Peking, being in request among gentlemen addicted to both liquor and society. A good deal of Jack's reputation he had taken pains to earn in the same manner. He usually clad himself in a certain rakish cast of garments, surmounted by a tall white hat, which was emphasized by a broad black band. This by no means indicated any special affliction in Jack's family, but was chosen with a fine instinct of the fitness of things from the Peking point of view. This hat was especially frowned

upon, for Pekin insisted on the moral quality of clothes, and associated white hats with the sporting men who passed through on their way to the Sparta fair.

This fine August morning, Jack was to meet Will Triplow and Amzi Tullis at Sam Lime-cooly's store, to arrange a camp-meeting party — for now that the gardens were all under way, the annual camp-meetings were announced for Lima and Sparta, as well as for Pekin.

Jack walked with a light heart down Main Street, snapping his riding whip about his slender legs and whistling an air from *Le Petit Faust*, in clear, low tones. Of the nativity of his tune he had no idea, but it had a light, worldly ring which caught his ear. He also realized that it was as different as possible from the fashion of music in Pekin, where the gayest young ladies spread out the Gospel Hymns when asked to favor with some music, and where the most hopeless midnight brawlers sang "Hold the Fort."

Jack stopped before the store door to pull off a piece of dried herring which hung at one side among the indications of Sam's varied trade.

"Jack, give us a piece!"

"Hello, Billy Campbell! Is that you?"

Jack handed down a piece of herring to an eight-year-old boy, who twitched his trousers and turned up a pair of blue eyes and a very freckled nose.

"Why, Billy, how you're blowing!"

"I've been runnin' races with Bob Wally, an' I can beat him, Jack. He run jis as tight as he could go, but I run the tightest."

Jack laughed so loud that Sam Limecooly came to the door.

"Jack, the fellows are waitin'."

"That's a good occupation. Billy, are you all well down to your house?"

"I guess mother ain't. She has her jaws tied up."

"How's your father?"

"He's gone to Lima, to get the power fixed."

"Hay-press broke again, eh?" Jack stood awhile, twirling his mustache.

"By the way, I forgot to ask after Aunt Kiz. She 'd never forgive me, Billy."

"Oh, she 's railin', as usual."

"Billy Campbell, you don't know what you 're talking about."

"That 's what mother said, anyway. She was cussin' things, that 's what she was doin'."

"That 's a fib. Aunt Kiz does n't say bad words."

"Then it 's because she dasn't." The youngster looked up from the doorstep.

"How do you know?"

"I see it in her eye."

"Jack! Jack!" called impatient voices from within.

Jack lifted one foot up the wooden step toward the door, and paused.

"I saw Nance Jackson going in your house this morning."

"She 's goin' to help wash. Looky here,

what she give me." The boy held out a corn-cob pipe.

Jack caught him by the shoulders.

"Billy Campbell, if I catch you with that pipe in your mouth, it won't be good for you."

"You ain't my keeper."

"But you won't, Billy," said the young man, condescending to coax. "It would make your women folks feel bad."

"Mebbe I won't."

"So Nance is there, helping wash. Is there anything the matter more than common?"

"Hello, there's Bob Wally. Hi, Bob!"

Billy started down the street at full speed, leaving Jack to chew the cud of his curiosity in the Campbell family's health and domestic affairs.

"What have they got Nance for to-day?"

"They ain't usually so considerate," he said to himself. "Drat the boy." Then he entered

Sam Limecooly's store.



CHAPTER TWO

II

Social Events are shaped in Sam Limecooly's Store



HERE he was assailed by the indignant voices of two young men. They were sufficiently well-favored youths, but of the bilious-type of the country. At present, they decorated the counter, and had between them a large cheese, at which they both were nibbling.

"How much time do you think I've got, Jack Racer, that you keep me waitin' here?"

"You've got all the time there is, my boy. Much as anybody."

Amzi Tullis, to whom Jack spoke, was the young Cræsus of the neighborhood, but a Cræsus whose proper view of the advantage of possessing fat meadows was tempered by

being also the possessor of a bristly shock of red hair and innumerable freckles. These qualifying facts bore outward fruit ; but in secret Amzi nourished visions of beautiful and dashing women in whose sight the fat meadows should entirely obscure the unlovelier features of his personality.

His companion, Will Triplow, kept the jewelry store of Peking. Will was a nice, dainty fellow, with well-kept nails. This should not have been a distinguishing feature in Peking, but, unhappily, it was. Will was a ladies' man and always to be depended on to show courtesies to young lady visitors in Peking. He was consequently much sought after on all social occasions, when his natural amiability was rendered more attractive by reason of a tenor voice. With this, it being neither too weak nor very strong, he was reasonably satisfied. Knowing a few chords on the piano, he could accompany himself, and showed the greatest readiness to fill up any social gap in

this way. Another amiable trait was his habit of keeping newspaper clippings in his pocket-book, from which verses of poetry and amusing incidents could be opportunely produced. You and I might have objected to his voice as too feminine, and to the particularity of his enunciation. But in Pekin these were held to be tokens of a refined nature.

The third of the trio was Sam Limecooly, big, ugly, sententious, and wise ; the proprietor of the largest store in the village, where, in his shirt-sleeves and with the assistance of a clerk, he measured calico and sold combs, hams, and molasses with strict impartiality and attention to business.

"Yes, Jack ; we have been here a considerable spell," said Mr. Triplow.

"Why do you fellows waste so much time talking?" said Jack, as he reversed a chair and bestrode it. "Have you engaged your teams?"

"That's settled so far as Triplow and I are concerned." Sam Limecooly, having dis-

patched a youthful customer with a bar of soap to finish the washing, was now at leisure to join in the conversation. "We engaged Tim Lucky's browns and two-seated concern. It's more to the purpose to settle about the girls."

"Tullis, what have you?" asked Jack, meditatively, and giving no heed.

"I've got a spanking new top-buggy!" Amzi looked from one to another and shut his lips in comical defiance. "I went to Sparkins at Lima and I said, 'Look here, Sparkins, I might as well buy the thing out and out. Give me the purtiest thing out, and I'll stand the damage.'"

"Cushions soft, back upholstered, springs easy?" Jack asked, still musing.

"Easy as a cradle. It's just such a stylish thing, Jack —" Amzi's face crimsoned as he threw out the suggestion — "I thought I'd ask Laury Francis."

"Why, of course. Get a girl to match," Jack

said, gruffly ; and Amzi felt himself brushed aside. The young man then resumed, with an air of indifference, " I suppose you fellows will take Miss Ross and Miss Burke, as you 're going together ? "

" Jehosaphat ! " cried Sam. Will Triplow, who had been lying on the counter, his head pillowed on a pile of brown paper, started up with eyes so bulging with astonishment that Jack broke into a loud laugh.

" Why, Jack, who are you going to take ? " inquired Amzi, who was in a cooler frame of mind, his fate being settled.

" I ought 'to have told you in the first place. It 's out of the question my taking anybody. When the basket-meeting was first talked about, Uncle George asked me to drive Elder Johnson out. You see, it is n't often the old fellow asks me a favor, and I want to oblige him. But I 'll be with you as soon as I tuck the elder safely away in the Amen corner. Now, I have an errand, as we 've about settled this

matter.” Jack started for the door, but without his usual alacrity.

“By the way, Tullis,” he called back, “there’s a Chicago fellow with stunning side-whiskers staying up at Francis’s. I’d go a little slow.”

He stopped, and watched with contentment Amzi’s sudden dislocation of mind at this piece of news, and then went to the rescue.

“Never mind, old fellow, he’ll be gone in a week, and both the girl and the buggy will keep.”

“But what’ll I do about the basket-meetin’, Jack?”

“Take Campbell’s niece, Amzi. She’ll appreciate your upholstery, eh?”

“Jus’ as you say, Jack,” said Amzi, now humble in his discomfiture. “She has n’t the beauty and the style of Laury Francis, but she’s comfortable and she’s soothin’.”

“Oh, I don’t suggest her as an anodyne,” said Jack, apparently hard to please.

Some association of ideas stirred Mr. Triplow, who moved on his brown-paper pillow, and, clasping his hands, began, —

O Woman ! in our hours of ease
Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,
When pain and anguish wring the brow
You d —

“How does it go, boys?”

“You bawl for her, like a calf for a cow. That’s truth, if it is n’t poetry,” said Jack, good-humoredly.

“I like Lucy because she listens so hearty.”

“And you talk so much, O sententious Samuel!”

“Yes, sir, she bends forward, cocks up one little ear, and looks you in the eye until you feel you’re Demosthenes or Cicero.”

“I’m with you, Limecooly,” chimed in Will Triplow. “I like to see a woman pay attention.”

“If you’ll allow me to suggest,” interrupted Jack, “you’ll send your ladies word, that no

time may be lost in collecting the stray yellow-legged chickens."

So saying, Jack departed, and might have been seen going up the street in a high state of satisfaction.

"If you'll allow me to suggest!" That is good," murmured Sam. As his own girl was away on a visit, he was indifferent as to whom he escorted. At the same time, he was curious at being disposed of so summarily.

Will Triplow had scarcely recovered from his astonishment at being thrust into what he had taken to be Jack's preserves, but he felt a new impulse.

"If you don't mind, Sam, I'll take Miss Burke. I always felt a desire to study her character."

"I'm glad, since things have turned out so," said honest Amzi, "that I'm to take Lucy. She's plain and simple. I never could abide riddles."

"Well, Anna's good enough for me," said Sam.

As the young men left, Sam watched them from the door, still wearing his puzzled look. "He's afraid to take one, and he's afraid to take both. That's my opinion."



CHAPTER THREE

III

On the Road to Camp-Meeting



EKIN is in the prairie country. East, west, north, south, it lies a dead level, diversified only by the hand of man in orchards, meadows, and low farmhouses, screened by plantations from the fierce sweep of the prairie winds. The range of vision is almost unbroken to where the yellow grasses touch the sky. But the sublimity of the vast expanse of the sea and the restfulness of the long mountain reaches are here only *ennui* and impatience. A fine land for corn and cattle! This is its aspect in the eyes of its inhabitants, and has added its touch of sordidness and commonplace to their character. This, however, is unappreciated at Pekin and, in any case, would be held immaterial.

At this season the roads are superb. They lie smooth and level between fields of yellow bloom and white buckwheat, where myriads of bees are sipping sweets for Pekin honey, and wanton butterflies are idling. To-day there is an almost unbroken procession of nondescript vehicles, laden with an equally nondescript variety of human beings, on the way to the camp-ground. Extremes meet in Judge Francis's fine carriage and daughter, just home from boarding-school, with her Chicago beau ; and Tim Lucky in his two-wheeled cart, with his old wife by his side.

Loitering at the start, to avoid the dust, and in no haste for the opening exercises, was the camp-meeting party. The special attraction of the day was Mahala Plyley, a female evangelist, who was in great demand for such occasions. This they knew. The postal card which assisted in carrying on the negotiations had been read aloud by Jack Racer in Sam Limecooly's store.

"My terms are," Miss Plyley wrote, "fifty dollars for three weeks' work. Please engage the largest house of worship, where all can gather that are ready to do battle on the Lord's side.

"P. S. I run all summer."

In some communities this postal card would have filled the front seats at an early hour, but Pekin was used to it, apostles being common to the prairie.

Miss Burke leaned idly back in the carriage at Will Triplow's side, her eyes half closed and on her handsome face a shadow of discontent. Miss Ross, on the front seat, was, on the contrary, in high spirits, making comments of more or less wit on everything on the road.

Anna Ross had what people call a sharp tongue. There is no doubt that it was a tongue one would hesitate to have engaged against one's self. The Ross family had lived at Pekin ever since Anna was a baby. She had grown

up with the Pekin boys and girls, and had ruled them, or fought them manfully if they resisted her rulings. She had once even drubbed great Sam Limecooly, now sitting by her side. He was much smaller then; in fact, he was only six years old, and had refused, after the twentieth time, to say bureau — he called it buow — for her amusement, Anna having spoken plainly ever since she could speak at all.

In those early days, Anna and Jack Racer had been allies, Anna engaging literally tooth and nail on Jack's side in any of his emergencies. In this way, she was a valuable friend, never thinking it worth inquiring what Mr. Triplow would call the "subject matter" of Jack's troubles. For this Jack had always been duly grateful, and a strong feeling existed between them. Until the arrival of Miss Burke, Anna had never thought of analyzing her and Jack's friendship. Her quick wit soon perceived a difference in Jack's attentions to Miss Burke.

Anna was not pleased with what she saw. Accordingly, the two girls became great friends. Anna's spirits on this day arose partly from the fact that at least Irene Burke was not going to the basket-meeting with Jack Racer. That she herself was not going with him gave her no trouble. Anna's happiness for some time had rested on such negative facts. On other occasions, receiving the lesser share of Jack's divided attentions had made her rather cross at home. This was somewhat hard on the Ross family, the harder from the fact that, as old Mr. Ross said, he "had no use for Jack Racer, anyway."

"There go Amzi and Lucy. Don't you give us your dust! How smiling Amzi looks. I wonder if that will make a match. It would be a good thing for her, she ain't any more than Campbell's hired girl. They say they pay her wages."

"That's just like you girls, always thinking of getting married."

"That's no such thing, Sam Limecooly. For my part, I don't think much of matrimony."

"Do you hear that, Miss Burke?" Mr. Triplow, who had been vainly endeavoring to study female character as represented by Miss Burke, was now glad to relieve his ill-paid efforts by joining in Anna's conversation.

"Oh, Miss Anna! you can't be in earnest."

"Yes, I am. So far as I can see, getting married only gives folks an extra good chance to be disagreeable. Isn't that so, Irene? Is the girl asleep?" Anna peered around.

"Are n't you fond of conversation, Miss Burke?" asked Mr. Triplow.

"I am in general, but not in particular," replied that lady, who was considering meanwhile what she thought of Anna's vulgar way of expressing herself. Miss Burke, coming from a larger town, had higher claims to refinements of speech.

"Well," exclaimed Mr. Triplow, "I enjoy the clashing of mind against mind, for my part."

Whereupon Miss Burke laughed hysterically, and Mr. Triplow felt more and more deeply how difficult was the task he had undertaken. "There comes Jack Racer with his new horse and trotting buggy. What a spectacle! Who has he with him?"

As Anna spoke, Miss Burke leaned forward curiously and then sank back in her seat with a shade less of discontent.

Jack sped forth with a merry nod, his feet planted a yard apart, his arms extended at full length, holding the tightly-drawn reins, a jockey cap pulled over his forehead.

"Hi, there! Look sharp! The elder's in a hurry."

"Mercy on me, you'd think Jack had entered for the Sparta fair. Do look at the elder."

The tall, gaunt form clutched with one hand the tall hat, the other clung to the back of the buggy, which left but little grip to the thin fingers.

Everybody gave way to the flying steed. Jimmy

Bergan drew his wagon up to one side of the road and stopped. Miss Samantha Dyer, who occupied a precarious chair in the wagon, brushed angrily the dust that Jack's wheels had transferred to her shoulders.

"I do think the law ought to make Jack Racer behave hisself. Such drivin' to meetin', dustin' everybody, is scan'lous."

"It's vain appealin' to the world's law, Sister Dyer," said Mrs. Bergan, who was spiritually minded. "It's grace Jack Racer needs, an' we may hope he'll be teched this day, though I do hate to feel gritty an' git my bunnit spiled; but sacrifices we are called upon to make, Sister Dyer."

"But I ain't satisfied with that view of it, Mis' Bergan, so long as there's peace justices and town constables to make folks behave. It is not as if it was rain, as falls on the just an' the unjust even on meetin' days, an' shrinkin' wool goods as it does. I never have a word to say agin Providence. I'm the las' person

to do that. But Jack Racer ain't him, nor no ways akin to him, that ever I heerd."

"But he works by insterments, Sister Dyer, some of them the lowest and meanest sort. Bein' a good Christian and perfessor, you can't deny that."

"Laws-a-mercy, who ever thought of denyin' it, Mis' Bergan?" Sister Dyer exclaimed, with some asperity. Having a more logical mind, she held in some contempt her companion's inability to keep direct hold upon a subject. But remembering her debt for a chair in the Bergan wagon, she added, graciously, "Let me straighten down your collar, Sister Bergan. You'll muss it."

Jack and the elder were spinning on.

"You see, Elder, I mean to get you there in time," said Jack, cheerily.

"But the horse, Jackson. The merciful man is merciful to his beast, the Scriptures say."

The elder spoke with difficulty, his teeth were

locked in unison with his grasp on the buggy seat.

"Never mind Fancy, as long as we enjoy it. I've speeded her on this road at 2:31. I'll do it again, if you like." Jack bent forward another half-inch and gave another loop to his lines. The elder let go of his hat and grasped Jack's arm fervently. The much-worn head-covering bounded off into the road, knocking the yellow bloom off the prairie daisies in its flight.

At a word the panting little mare drew up. Jack threw down the lines, leaped out, and chased the hat, which he carefully dusted with his handkerchief.

"There, Elder, good as new."

The elder examined it carefully, and replaced it on his head with an extra pull, which brought it about his ears and ready for any emergency; this, however, he meant to avert.

"I am afraid, Jackson, you have what is called a fast horse."

"No, indeed, Elder. Fancy is n't fast, she's only industrious. When any work is laid out for her to do, she up and does it. Elder, Fancy is an example I have always before me."

Jack looked around with serious face.

"I am rejoiced to hear it, Jackson. The fast horse leadeth to destruction."

"I remember once when it went before a fall. Spilled, Elder, in front of the prettiest girls of Sparta, driving against Tim Lucky's Hambletonian — you know that strain. Destruction! You would have said so, if you had seen that sulky and my breeches."

The elder did not reply. Jack turned around inquiringly, and saw the moisture in the old man's eyes.

"Yes, it would grieve me, Jackson, if you found the paths of sin pleasant. At first they do seem so to a young man of high spirits. You see, I knew your mother when she was Agnes Kemp, a pretty, fair young girl, prettier and fairer than they seem to me nowadays. I

used to watch her in singing school, and think the heavenly choirs could n't hold a sweeter voice or face. But your father was a likelier man than me, Jackson, so I held my peace. I never forgot her, and when I see that young thing, Campbell's niece, that has something the same takin' ways your mother had, I feel more than ever kind feelings for Agnes Kemp's son."

Jack took his lines in one hand, and laid the other in the elder's palm, who closed his fingers over it. Jack did not turn. His hand rested quietly for some minutes. When he lifted it, he pointed to the smoke curling above the green woods beyond, and to the figures moving under the trees. Presently the road disclosed the great white tent.

"You see, Elder, we are nearly there. A pretty sight, is n't it?"

The old man raised his eyes aloft.

"How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts!"

“ ‘Yea, the sparrow hath found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young, even Thine altars, O Lord of Hosts, My King, My God.’ ”





CHAPTER FOUR

IV

Wherein Pekin is seen Uniting Religion and Festivity



HE camp-meeting grounds comprised a pretty wooded area, known in the local dialect as "the timber." Through it ran a small stream. This bit of undulating green was the pride of all the country roundabout and was shown by the inhabitants to visitors as "scenery." From the point of approach, the road by which Jack and the elder came, it was a pleasing scene. The white tent gleamed among the tree tops; the blue smoke from the camp-fires curled above them; and under their leafy arms, figures added the grace of life and movement. Nearer, the strains of the Gospel Hymns floated on the air.

Scene and sound thus brought the occasion up to its ideal significance. Closer view somewhat rudely dispelled this vision, for the mind is only allowed to hold its perfect images for an instant. The log-cabin in which the prudent householder sheltered his family disclosed in its surroundings the absence of sewerage and garbage carts. The handmaidens about the stoves on the porches were neither picturesque nor melodious. The rows of tents gave into interiors with glimpses of unmade beds and confusion of wearing apparel. The greensward was despoiled by the débris of picnic parties and strewn with that later triumph of civilization, — paper collars.

About the door of the large tent was a group of young people, laughing, chaffing, and indulging in the varied forms of wit in vogue in the district. No questions of propriety disturbed the hilarity of the occasion. From time to time couples strayed, hand in hand, into the tent to enjoy one another's society undisturbed.

Again, the group would part for a mother leading out a crying child, or for a bevy of restless children who had grown tired of the hard benches and had departed with more or less circumstance.

Jack's appearance with the elder created the general interest which Jack's movements usually aroused, and which he enjoyed with apparent unconsciousness. The throng at the door gave way before him. Jack pressed down the centre aisle, looking back occasionally after the elder, who threaded his way with some difficulty. Jack's presence in the more active quarters of the tent made a little sensation. The attention of a rural congregation is very lightly held. It now broke entirely loose from the speaker, who had entered into the fervent state of her discourse. Jack, having found the elder a seat near the pulpit, started back through the crowded aisle. The congregation, with one movement, turned its head to follow the slim figure with the rakish white coat and odious hat.

A small cloud, which betokened rising temper, appeared on the speaker's face. She was scarcely older than Jack, a square-faced, dark-browed woman, with short, crisp hair and stalwart face.

"Stop!" she cried, exasperated by the unusual length of the interruption and that slightly superior air to preachments which Jack did not hide.

"Stop, vain and foolish young man! Has nobody warned you of the wrath to come, that you turn your back on the Gospel and its ministers, and walk out of the presence of the Holy Spirit like a young turkey cock?"

Jack felt himself addressed, and turned and looked at the angry young priestess.

"Stop, I tell you, or the day will come when you will call on the rocks and hills to fall on you. That hat that you hide your face behind will lie crushed and trampled in the dust, and the fine garments with which you mock the congregation of the righteous will be things

of shreds and patches, and in vain will you call on high Heaven to cover your nakedness."

Jack still stood imperturbably facing the preacher. An instinct of politeness held him. She was a woman and she was talking to him, Jack Racer. The elder raised his gaunt form, and held up a warning hand toward the excited woman.

"Stop, sister. The ways of the Lord are not our ways. He speaks in the thunder, but also in the still, small voice. Neither you nor I know through what winding roads it may reach the sinful heart. Let the young man go. Whether he knows it or not, he is by inheritance the child of the Kingdom, and we will pray that the day will come when he will pass joyfully through the open door. Go, Jackson, and find your young friends."

The elder sat down and Jack passed swiftly out of the opening.

The preacher took up the fervent paragraphs she had abandoned ; but little conversational

groups, accompanied by the nodding of elderly bonnets, broke out through the tent.

Samantha Dyer leaned forward and poked Mrs. Bergan, on the seat in front.

"It served him right; Jack Racer has the impudence of Old Nick, an' if he don't land in the calaboose for some of his didos, I'm no Cassander. What a scorin' she give him! Did me as much good as her preachin'."

"Yes, Sister Dyer, but I was gittin' oneasy. Her words were vergin' nigh on to immodesty."

"That's true enuff; an' she an onmarried woman. But, laws, these preachers git so used to talkin' Scriptur' they don' pick an' choose among their words, like you an' I would do, Mis' Bergan."

Young Mr. Racer quite lost his turkey-cock air beyond the range of the tent and its loungers. On a clean, grassy knoll, beyond the noise of the tent and the settlement of the cabins, Jack saw Amzi's ponderous form disposing logs,

and Will Triplow bowed beneath baskets. Toward them he hastened his steps.

Anna called him to relieve her in emptying the baskets, but Jack paused to assist Miss Burke in disengaging a tablecloth. Irene gracefully sank by one of the rearranged logs, and began to talk to Jack in one of those conversational undertones instinctively resented by young ladies like Miss Ross.

"Rene," she called, "get up, and come help."

"I can't; it's too warm."

"You're red as a beet," exclaimed Anna, bluntly. "But you have n't done anything. There's Lucy, who has n't stopped, and she's fresh as a daisy."

"Oh, she's used to it." Irene yawned, and leaned back lazily.

Campbell's niece, who had taken Miss Laura Francis's place on the new cushions, was hovering about Amzi with her arms full of twigs, gathered to boil the kettle.

Jack turned and watched her with a smile of recollection.

Miss Burke resented his wandering eyes, and appreciated Anna's state of mind. But she was too much a woman of the world, having come from Peru, to revenge herself as a Pekin girl might have done. She laughed lightly.

"If you don't believe me then, call me lazy. There! I've no reputation to sustain now. Mr. Racer, I left my fan in the carriage and I need it."

Jack got up to obey her imperious tones. His prompt obedience seemed to Anna contemptible.

She was grinding coffee on a stump. As he passed, she said :

"You ought to wear a collar."

He took the coffee-mill from her hand and seated himself beside her.

"Now you can give your whole mind to it," he said, grinding away.

“To what?”

“To scolding me.”

“Oh, bah!” And she attempted to take the mill from him; but he ground away gravely to the end, then gave it to her and went after the fan.

Will Triplow, who felt he had no right to approach Miss Burke while Jack was there, was now ready to do his duty as a cavalier. This he still conceived was in the way of making conversation.

“What do you think, Miss Burke, of getting up a Shakespeare club?”

“A what?” said Miss Burke, raising herself with apparent difficulty to the level of Will’s discourse.

“A Shakespeare club. In Sparta there is a Shakespeare club, and a literary society, called the Erodolphian. You see we have so few opportunities for mental culture in Pekin. I suppose you have belonged to such clubs in Peru and could take the lead?”

Irene sank back again, languidly.

"Suppose you explain your idea, Mr. Triplow. Then I can say yes and no."

"Well, you see, we would meet one evening a week, each member assuming a character — not changing our clothes, of course, merely reading; and you could assign the characters. Now, there's Hamlet," — and Mr. Triplow entered into more minute details as Jack came up and tossed the fan in Irene's lap.

"How does the idea strike you, Miss Anna; and you, Jack?"

"I hate clubs," said Anna.

"Depends on what's trumps, and the color of your jacks," remarked Mr. Racer, profoundly, poking up the grass with a stick.

"Poor Shakespeare," said Miss Burke, pityingly. "Do you know, Mr. Triplow, very few professional elocutionists can read Shakespeare."

"I suppose folks in Pekin know their letters. I rather think we use the same alphabet they

do in other places, unless it is Peru," Anna answered, with danger in her eye.

"Oh — yes — well — " Miss Burke stopped with an air which seemed to say it was n't worth while to enter into explanations.

Jack got up hastily.

"What is the use of two people trying to hang a kettle on a rotten stick, when there are kind and pretty women with stoves up there. Give me the thing, Lucy !"

"Oh, thank you, Jack. Such disobliging sticks I never saw."

"I should think so. Look at your poor scratched hands. Amzi, what were you thinking about ?" Jack whirled fiercely on Amzi, who turned up to him a face so scarlet and grimy from the rich prairie sod that Jack burst into a loud laugh, then turned beseechingly to Lucy, —

"Can't you settle those girls over there ? Make them get up and go to work. Send Anna a mile away, after water, with Trip-

low, and turn William Shakespeare off of the grounds."

.

After Sam Limecooly had bathed one end of the tablecloth with a jug of cream, while lying prone and painfully removing the bits of wood and stout tufts of prairie grass beneath, and after the girls had fastened down the corners with wood, against the frequent prairie zephyrs, the lunch only waited Jack's return with the coffee. Good humor was now restored, and all were entertained by Will Triplow's newspaper jokes, when Jack listlessly appeared, holding the coffee-pot carelessly near his white trousers.

"Mercy alive, Jack, why don't you hurry? I have a preference for hot coffee." Anna opened the pot suspiciously, and snuffed at it with a discriminating nose.

"It's stone cold," she shrieked. "It has n't been near the fire."

Jack sat calmly down on a log, while the rest

of the party gathered about the pot, felt its sides, and peeped within to be assured individually of Anna's statement. It was even true.

"Jack, why did n't you cook it?" Will Trip-low fiercely inquired.

"William, they would n't let me," replied the silent young man on the log. "I made every sort of overture. It was only a question of how much snubbing I could stand. I even went so far as to show one woman how she could deal over her pots and kettles and let me in—have a Jack pot, as it were—but she flouted me, and I retired. The coffee is all there, and if any of you fellows would like to try it, I'll resign."

"Never mind, Jack. I'll take it; meeting's breaking now, and I'll find a place." Lucy picked up the coffee-pot and started down the knoll.

"Stop, Lucy. I'll go with you and handle the thing. You'll spoil your frock." Jack

bounded after her. For some seconds they walked silently along the path, then Jack suddenly asked, —

“ Did you have a nice ride, Lucy ? ”

“ Oh, yes, Jack, a lovely ride.”

“ Bang up buggy, is n't it ? Amzi got it at the Lima fair, — first premium.”

“ I know it was easy. I had nothing to do but sit back and be comfortable.”

“ Of course Amzi made himself agreeable ? ”

“ He was ever so kind. He told me all about the meadows, and a new steer he has bought, and what a good manager his mother is, and how she makes her butter. I did n't know butter could be so absorbing a subject.” Lucy looked up in Jack's face and laughed, but Jack's face was grave.

“ Amzi is n't much of a talker, Lucy. But he's good and he's safe. He'd never break his wife's heart ; and there are a good many others more flashy who would. Besides, Lucy, no mistake, Amzi is rich, and his wife will

only have to sit back and be comfortable, just as you did in the buggy to-day."

"You forget the butter, Jack. It has to be worked a half hour to each pound, and his mother looking on."

"Then let her do it herself," exclaimed Mr. Racer, angrily. "But that's all nonsense. I'd back a loving little wife against a mother any day."

"Oh, 'a loving wife,'" said Lucy. "You did n't mention that before, Jack." And there was that in her inflections to which Jack felt it would not be wise to reply.

The path narrowed and Jack stepped back to allow Lucy to go in advance. Gradually he slackened his steps until he got the lithe form before him into sufficient focal distance, when he paused to consider it critically.

"Lucy!" as he again quickened his steps.

"What is that stuff you're wearing?"

"Maidenhair fern, Jack. Oh, you mean my dress?"

Jack nodded.

"It's calico; my old lavender calico. What a question!"

"I think it's nice, very nice, calico."

"Does it really look nice? I was so afraid it would n't. I had to wash it yesterday and iron it by candlelight."

"It'll do," replied Mr. Racer, laconically.

"There is Miss Samantha Dyer at the Driggs's cabin, we'll ask her." Lucy pointed to a gaunt form bending over a boiling pot, and a face dimly descried through a cloud of vapor.

"What, that old witch?" Jack closed the distance between them with a bound. "I would n't ask her for half-a-dollar."

"Why, Jack?"

"Because I did ask her, and she turned me away like a whipped school-boy."

"You said something to her."

"Of course I did. I was polite as a Frenchman."

"That 's what 's the matter. She thought you were making fun of her."

"Shall I push her one side, and knock over pots and kettles? I'll do it, if you say."

"Please leave it to me. You've done quite enough."

"Who 's that? Is that you, Lucy? Yes, seein' it 's you, maybe I can make room."

Miss Samantha covered her pot and took Lucy in with a glance that left Jack altogether outside.

"Here, Jack, give it to me."

"No, you'll spoil your frock." Miss Samantha stood looking grimly on while Jack lifted the coffee-pot to its place.

"You 're fortinit, Lucy, if you can keep your clothes clean. It 's more 'n some other folks can do, what with other folks' fast drivin' an' dust-slingin'."

Jack prudently retired to a stump outside.

"Sorry I ain't got a cheer to offer, Lucy," said Miss Samantha, now quite hospitable; "but

take a bucket." And she turned the water-pail upside down.

"Yer Aunt Kiz ain't hyar, Lucy?"

"No, indeed. You know Aunt Kiz has n't any faith in the good of camp-meetings."

"Yer Aunt Kiz is by natur' a doubter, an' she has her experience grafted on to that. She met Preacher Rossiter at camp-meeting an' was brought in under him. Rossiter was powerful fur awakenin' sinners. Aunt Kiz was a purty young girl with a neat figger, an' wearin' number ones. She sot a good deal on herself an' that made her fall greater."

"I don't understand you, Miss Samantha. What do you mean by her fall?" Lucy got up from her bucket, which rolled off the porch.

"Sho, child, sit down! Why, where's the bucket?" And she rescued it from a wandering pig that had half disappeared inside of it. "Is it possible you don't know? If I'd a thought that, I'd a bit my tongue —"

“Whatever it is, I know it is n’t Aunt Kiz’s fault.”

“Oh, gals is gals, an’ it’s the natur’ of wimmen to run after the preacher. Rossiter was run after oncommon, but there’s no question he took to Keziar. They was promised sweethearts an’ was to be married when he got a circuit of his own. But some highflier hearin’ him, an’ thinkin’ him promisin’, sent him to college somewhere east in Ohio to git trained, an’ he got trained so fur an’ so fast, he left Keziar in the lurch, at least he never remembered to send her so much as the scratch of a pen afterward. She ain’t much use fur means of grace since.”

“And did she never hear of him again?” asked Lucy, breathless and with wide-open eyes.

“I dunno. She never let on. The last I heerd of him he had a fine church an’ a fine lady in Chicago.”

“Then that is what has made Aunt Kiz so bitter, so funny bitter, I mean. We like it ;

and I thought it was to make us laugh. Poor Aunt Kiz!" Her eyes swam with tears.

"Well, Kiz allays did see the rediclus side of things."

"I don't care if he is a preacher, he is a mean, mean man, and if I ever see him I'll tell him so."

"That 's right, Lucy; and I'll tell him so too," shouted Jack from his stump.

Miss Samantha raised her eyes and looked calmly through her spectacles into vacancy.

"Yer pot 's biled, Lucy."

.

The ravenous party was grouped about the dinner-table.

"Here, Amzi, come take the coffee. I've boiled it."

"'I've boiled it,' indeed!" cried Anna. "Why did n't you boil it the first time? I'm so hungry that I've devoured in my mind everything on this table."

"For so much be thanked, Anna's mind is n't as large as her mouth," said Sam Limecooly, solemnly.

"Nor so active," added Jack, seating himself by Miss Burke's side, with no other invitation than the sweeping aside of her voluminous draperies as he appeared.

"I'm pretty faint, but I still have some strength in my arms," was Anna's reply, flinging at each a phenomenal pickle.

The wit of such parties, as the hunger, is not of a very delicate quality. The conversation was chiefly personal, and, for the most part, turned on the respective merits of one another's appetites ; but, such as it was, was greatly enjoyed.

"Well, really, I've done everything to divide this chicken but put my foot on it."

"Do stop, Anna," Amzi finally begged ; "I'm too full to laugh any more."

"Then why don't you laugh outside ?" Jack asked, plaintively.

"There's your friend, Mr. Racer." Miss Burke pointed to the tall form of the elder coming toward them, holding an ear of corn, which from time to time he lifted with suspicion to his nose.

"What is the old fellow about?" Jack jumped to his feet.

"He's trying to tole a donkey," remarked Anna, still wrestling with her chicken.

"Oh, Miss Anna, you are always so exceedingly severe," exclaimed Mr. Triplow, and was about to continue his protestations against the severity of her sex, when the elder arrived.

"Jackson, I'm sorry to disturb you and your young friends. I thought I'd bait the horse for you, and, strangely, the beast refused his corn. I myself have observed a peculiar smell about it." The elder lifted it again to his nose. "It is an odor not altogether disagreeable, but very stimulating to the nostrils."

Jack took the ear and smelled it; a very unnecessary act. Meanwhile the color stole over

his face, which was always rather pale, and by no means accustomed to blushing.

"As you say, Elder, it is peculiar. The mare won't touch the corn? You're good to trouble yourself about it at all. I'll get the bait from some of the other fellows. Don't bother, Elder."

"It's whiskey. Soaked in whiskey." Amzi examined it with the air of a connoisseur.

"Now that you mention it, I do observe that strange pungency that belongs to strong drink."

"Sure enough, Elder. The solution, I think, is plain," said Jack, hesitating to gain time.

"Oh, how horrid! It's liquor," said the ladies in succession, each having touched it with the tip of her nose.

"It must have been the drive," continued Jack.

"Whiskey, you know, Elder, is nothing but corn-juice. It must have been the drive."

"How is that, Jackson?"

"Don't you see, Elder? The corn was loose in the box and we drove pretty fast."

"Ah, I see ; the corn has been bruised, and the juice set free. But — I'd no idea fermentation would go on so quickly." The elder looked inquiringly.

"It's pretty warm to-day."

"Very true. Very true. A singular phenomenon." The group was too astonished for speech, and the elder continued : "There's one point I'd like to make, my young friends. Touch not, nor defile you lips with that from which an ignorant beast turns with loathing. If you can borrow any fodder, Jackson, I'll go, for I've promised to take a snack with Brother Goby."

"Well, I call that the finest impromptu I ever heard," exclaimed Anna, as the elder moved away.

"You give it a fine name, Anna."

Jack started at the sound of Lucy's voice.

"Look here ; all of you. I'd rather lie to the elder than that he should think ill of me."

"Why, in the name of common sense," asked

Sam, recovering his speech, "did you put a bottle of whiskey loose in the box?"

"I did n't. Tom Bruce had it the day we went to the Sparta races, and I forgot all about it. The bottle, of course, broke, and I suppose the glass was ground to powder in the mêlée. As for the elder, a lie more or less won't hurt me, and the truth would have pained him."

"At any rate, you only suggested the story, and if he was such an old goose as to swallow it —"

"Thank you, Miss Burke, for your charity. Now and then I do feel mean. Limecooly, lend me some fodder."

"Come, Anna, let's clear the things away."

Lucy was already at work, and the two young men started for the horses.

The group lay lazily disposed on the green turf and awaited the two young men.

"What will we do with ourselves this afternoon?" asked Anna, in a sleepy voice, her head in Irene's lap.

"Suppose we tell conundrums, Miss Anna." Will Triplow began to feel for his pocket-book.

"I think we ought to go to one meeting." Lucy stood up, and Amzi lifted his ponderous frame.

"Speak for yourself, Lucy, and for Amzi if he's willing. I'm not going into the tent."

"Conundrums are childish. I'm going to gather lichens to finish my bracket. Won't you help me, Mr. Racer?"

"Oh, Irene, you said just now it was too warm to stir."

"So it is. I shall sit under some tree and Mr. Racer will gather the lichens."

"Mr. Racer will, of course, obey," sneered Anna.

Jack turned from watching Lucy and Amzi on their way to the tent.

"Mr. Racer, since you are all so mighty polite, will, of course, obey Miss Burke. Miss Burke, at your service."

"Well, I call this a nice party. Irene Burke never thinks of anybody but herself."

"Miss Anna, there are some entertaining young ladies here from Salem. Suppose we join them," suggested Mr. Triplow.

"I hate the Salem girls, they are such an airy set. But, laws, you need n't think you are bound to stay here with me."

"You go, Will," said the amiable Sam. "I'll stay here with Anna, and we'll abuse you all in turn." Will hastened, and Sam sat down; but, except in philosophy, it must be confessed that Mr. Limecooly's afternoon was not fruitful.





CHAPTER FIVE



V

Flirtation is Industriously Fanned



ACK and Miss Burke wandered silently away into the depths of the timber. Jack led the way with rapid step and preoccupied air. There was a cloud on Irene's brow, and finally she dropped breathless among the roots of a wide-spreading tree. Jack, intent on his occupation, busied himself with great zeal, speaking only to announce some desirable lichen or bit of moss.

Miss Burke fanned herself in silence for some time, and then adjusted her position with great care. Again her handsome face lowered. At length she spoke.

"Do come and sit down, Jack ; you make me nervous."

"Why, Irene, I thought you wanted them."

"So I do, but I did n't mean to be unmerciful."

"I am at your service, you know."

Jack threw the little basket at her feet and dropped on the grass. He sat silent for an instant, and then stretched himself on the turf and rested his head on his hand. Although he lay quite near, his face was turned away and his gaze was off toward the golden meadows. Plainly, Miss Burke liked this arrangement no better. Her face grew dark again, but finally she said, sweetly :

"Jack, I looked for you last night ; and you have n't told me why you did n't come."

"Have n't I ? Aunt George had a tea-fight and made a point of my staying to take home the wounded."

"I was sorry. Mrs. Maule was away, and I sat on the porch until ten o'clock waiting for you. We would have been all alone."

"By Jove, that was too bad," exclaimed Jack, without turning his head. "But I had the

worst of it, Irene. I can imagine you looking distractingly beautiful in the moonlight, but can you imagine me tugging along the Sparta road with an elderly female on each arm and carrying what they called their work? I could scarcely see over it."

Irene's quick ear detected that Jack was making talk.

"But why did n't you come back our way? I was sitting at the window and would have seen you and come downstairs."

"You would have driven me away if I had dragged myself to your place. I had no backbone left. You've no idea how I'd been bullied all evening."

Irene leaned forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"Poor Jack! If you had come to me I would have consoled you."

At her touch Jack turned on his elbow and looked toward the tree against which Irene leaned.

"I was in the mood to have played the Good Samaritan. The oil and bandages were near."

Jack still stared.

"Provided the right man fell by the roadside, — you, Jack."

"By Jove, Irene, you are a beautiful woman," said the young man, letting her light talk go by. Miss Burke laughed gleefully.

"You always say that as if you had made a new discovery."

"I always have."

"I believe you do forget me, Jack, when you are away."

Jack did not answer, but continued to gaze.

"A fair return, Jack. You are the only companionable person I've found in Pekin. What would I have done without you, my boy!"

Jack drew himself toward her on the grass, his pale face growing paler. He stretched out his arm idly and caught up one of the light ruffles of her dress, fingering it with apparent interest, but without speaking.

Irene watched him curiously. Finally, with some consciousness, Jack said:

"This is pretty stuff. Women's clothes are marvellous to me. Yours, Irene, are always like a cloud from which you seem to emerge. This vapory, frothy stuff is not calico, is it?"

Jack asked, with sudden thought.

"Calico," she answered, with some indignation. "You ask if my organdie muslin is calico. Do people trim calico with lace?"

"Calico is nice," persisted Jack.

"Calico costs eight cents a yard, and this forty cents. You see, I have the right to be indignant, Jack. I would n't wear calico to a picnic."

"Don't say anything against calico, Irene."

Jack put his fingers in his ears and whirled himself over, but with too much energy, for the momentum sent him rolling to the foot of the hillside, where he lay, with his fingers still in his ears.

Irene laughed loudly from her mossy seat.

Jack made no motion to come back, but still

lay flat on the grass, looking up into the tree-tops.

"Come back, Jack. I'll forgive you."

"I can't get up," answered the young man, sprawling like a school-boy. "'*Facilis descensus Averni*;' that is to say, it is easy to roll down hill. Everybody knows one can't roll back."

Irene paused, with moody face. This was truly uphill work. She hesitated for some moments.

"I'll come help you, Jack."

She shook out her draperies and started lightly down the hillside. Midway, a stray bough caught her hair. Jack had not moved.

"I'm a prisoner, Jack. You'll have to help me."

Jack looked toward her. Irene stood on tip-toe, with her fluffy draperies about her, trying to release her hair. Her sleeves had fallen back, baring her shapely arms, which, uplifted, brought into clear outlines the beautiful curves

of her undulating form. The color came and went in her face, and on her fell the sunlight filtered through the leaves.

"How unkind, Jack, when I was coming to your relief," she called to Jack, still on his back, and rapturously gazing at her.

He jumped to his feet.

"You would n't say so, if you knew."

She dropped her arms and yielded herself to Jack, whose arms encircled her head, while his slim, muscular fingers broke the unruly twigs.

"There, you are free ; but let me pick the leaves from your hair. .

Irene did not move, but stood with bent head, steadying herself by resting one hand on Jack's arm, while he slowly gathered the leaves from her escaping hair.

They were all gone, but still he stood.

"Thank you, Jack," Irene said, in a low voice, and, taking his hand, went back to her seat beneath the tree. They sat down still hand in hand, and without speaking.

After some moments Irene said :

“ Jack, you must let me do my hair.”

Jack unloosed his fingers, and buried his face in his hands. Irene twisted up her hair, looking the while at Jack with a curious smile, although her face yet showed some traces of emotion.

“ Oh, it won't stay up.” Down fell the luxuriant hair about her shoulders. “ There, my comb has fallen by you, Jack.”

Jack picked it up.

“ No,” as she held out her hand, — “ let me put it in.” He took up the long coil of hair and put it to his lips.

“ Foolish boy.”

With some skill, he wound the coil about Irene's well-shaped head.

“ Have you made me look quite like a fright ? ” She turned her smiling face toward him and looked into his, with eyes softly veiling her triumph.

For answer he drew her toward him and kissed her beautiful lips.

"Oh, Jack, suppose somebody saw you."

"We are two out of all the world. The rest are dead, gone, forgotten."

There they sat until the long shadows sent Mr. Triplow calling through the timber, in his high tenor :

"Miss Burke ! oh, Miss Burke ! We are about departing."

"Oh, Jack, there is that silly fellow. I'm afraid I have n't been very polite."

"Don't ask me to blame you, Irene." And together they started toward Mr. Triplow's voice.

In the evening when Lucy went to her room, she drew up her blind to let in the full tide of moonlight, for her candle enticed mosquitoes, which were of an unusually long-billed breed at Pekin.

As she stood at the window, two figures passed beneath.

"A pair of sweethearts. Why, it's Jack and Miss Burke !"

“Goodness gracious, Lucy, ain’t you in bed yit? I was tiptoein’ in for fear I’d wake you.”

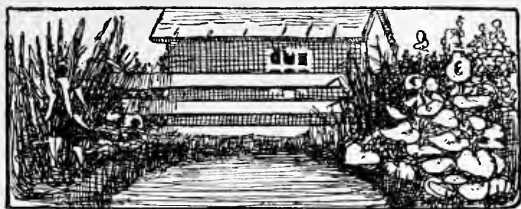
“I’m doing my hair, Aunt Kiz.”

Lucy took down the long braids and began to languidly unplait them.

“What’s the matter, child? Are you tired, or has somebody been sassin’ you?”

“What an idea! I’m only tired.” She was silent a moment. “I do believe, Aunt Kiz, that ironing is n’t as hard work as enjoying yourself when you’ve laid out to have a good time.”

“Humph! You’re young to have found that out. But since you have, I’m not surprised you got it at the basket-meetin’.”



CHAPTER SIX

VI

Mr. Racer's Kindly Relations with Several Ladies Become Apparent



ON'T you tell me you won't do it, Billy Campbell ! ”

Aunt Kiz said this as she was reversing Billy Campbell from a position which allowed a large proportion of blood in his little body to discolor his face.

“ I should think you 'd be ashamed of yourself to whip such a little boy.”

Billy had backed himself up against the wall before venturing this remark, and looked indignant reproach.

“ Well, I 'm not, and if you tell me again you ‘won't do it,’ I'll spank you if Queen Victory herself is here.”

“ No, you would n't.”

"Yes, I would, you naughty boy. I've whipped your father before you, and I've whipped Lucy, and I'll whip you, too."

"No, you would n't. If I'd tell you 'I won't do it' before a strange woman, you know you would n't turn me up and show my dirty patched breeches. You would n't, either."

"Well, I could mighty soon take you into the back kitchen."

"That was n't what you said. You know it was n't."

"Billy Campbell, why don't you mind your aunt?" cried a voice of exaggerated sternness, from the window.

"Coz I ain't a good minder, Jack Racer."

"Is that you, Jack Racer? I ain't see hide nor hair of you for a coon's age."

"I've been asleep, Aunt Kiz. There, Billy, cut and run." Jack lifted the boy out of the window.

"Yes, asleep; prowlin' around nights, like an owl."

"And, like an owl, I have to sleep days. See?"

Still, young Mr. Racer colored slightly.

"I heerd of you turnin' the basket-meetin' into a horse-race."

"Look here, Aunt Kiz, I'm not going to let you bully me. Beside, we're in the same cart."

"I race horses, do I?"

"No, but Mahala Plyley says you're the Achan in the camp."

"Who's he? I heerd she gave you a dress-in'."

Jack leaped into the room through the window, and they laughed the laugh of the unregenerate, which was loud and long.

"Oh, what a noise!" Lucy opened the door, broom in hand. On her head was a blue sweeping cap, with a nodding frill framing a bright young face. Her sleeves were rolled above the dimpled arms and a checked gingham apron, such as the young ladies of Pekin copy out of the *Designer*, the *Decorator* and the *Ladies' Bou-*

doir, covered her dress, which was neatly tucked up—a picturesque costume, which tends to reduce domestic work to merely an opportunity.

“Does n’t she look formidable, Aunt Kiz? Is that a weapon of offence?”

“This is sweeping day, Jack. I always clear the room.”

“Polite, is n’t she?” Jack nodded to Aunt Kiz. “Lucy, let me help.” He seized the broom and began sweeping, at least with zeal. Aunt Kiz prudently gathered up her stockings and retired with her chair to the sidewalk, where she was out of the dust and could exchange crisp comments with the passers-by.

“Oh, Jack, what a dust you make! Don’t sweep except where I’ve sprinkled tea leaves,” Lucy cried, walking before him, and dropping from her finger-tips the fragrant tea. “No, that is n’t the way.” She paused, watching him critically.

“Pshaw! Anybody can sweep. What you want to do is to get the dirt out.”

"But there are ways and ways. Hold the broom straight. Here."

"Is n't that the way I do?" exclaimed Jack, ruefully.

"Not if I am a judge." Jack admitted to himself admiration of Lucy's quick, even strokes.

"I believe there is a trick in it," he said aloud.

"But, Lucy, you'll spoil your hands. You ought to wear gloves."

"Don't you be puttin' notions in Lucy's head," shouted Aunt Kiz from the pavement. "Sweep-in', an' plenty of it, is good for gals. Makes 'em healthy."

"It will round out the arms," said Mr. Racer, thoughtfully.

"If you only would move the sewing machine, Jack. That would be a help. But don't, oh, Jack, don't open all the doors! It keeps the dust so — so undecided."

"How she orders a fellow about. Does she always have her own way?"

"Aunt Kiz will see the joke of that."

“Just look how you walked away with Miss Samantha.”

“Do you know, I saw her coming down the street a little while ago with her arms full of bundles. They stuck out in every direction, until she looked just like — just like a hat-rack.”

“Yes,” called Aunt Kiz, “and she turned the corner instead of comin’ past; I’d a thought she was mad if she had n’t sent in yesterday and borried the tubs. I think it was grocery things she had, from the shape of the bundles. I expect she’s goin’ to have company and ain’t goin’ to give us an invite, since she went down pump way, and this is a half square nigher.”

“I know she won’t ask me,” said Jack, mournfully. “I regret to say that lady flouts me. I wonder why? I never did her any harm.”

“Maybe you did her a favor; that’ll serve, with some folks,” said Aunt Kiz, grimly.

“I can’t say I ever particularly obliged her, either. But that would n’t be a satisfactory

reason for treating me like the dust beneath her commodious carpet-slippers."

"What are you but a worm of the dust?" retorted Aunt Kiz.

"I'll be an anaconda, if you like; but don't be so disagreeable in your choice of crawling things."

"Jack," said Lucy, emerging from a corner, where she had been on her knees with a turkey-wing, "you like it."

"Like being called a caterpillar?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. You enjoy the estimation in which you are held by Miss Samantha, Mahala Plyley, and the rest of the good people. You've earned it. At least, I mean you try to make them think you've earned it."

"You've chopped that up fine. Just listen to her, Aunt Kiz!"

Jack was sitting on the corner of the table, swinging a slender leg. Lucy came up and stood before him. Both hands clasped the

broom-handle and her chin rested on her hands. One slippered foot crossed the other and stood on its toe, in a manner quite captivating to Jack, who at first gave less heed to her words.

"This is what I mean," said Lucy, speaking very slowly, and with a thoughtful look directed toward some far-away source, where her ideas seemed to be stored, "when you talk to them you make your words very meek and humble, and then you put an expression on your face which takes all the humility out of the words."

"Well, now ! You know I did n't think I was that kind of a fellow — to have everything so cut and dried, I mean. I'd really like to see that expression."

"Jack," cried Aunt Kiz, "get a fan like Laury Francis's, with a looking-glass in the stick. I see her in church looking after her crinkles. You could keep it in your pistol pocket."

"Do ! One with white feathers," laughed Lucy, and went back to her corners.

This did not please Jack, who was thinking it a fine thing to be lectured by a slip of a girl.

"But, seriously, Lucy, I'm not conscious of what you say. It is n't my words, but my face?

That comes of having no whiskers to hide behind," he added, ruefully. "And it won't rub

off." He drew out a fine cambric handkerchief, which was also one of his affectations,

and showed her no results of vigorous polishing.

But Lucy did not seem sufficiently amused.

"If you could only describe it," he said.

"Will Triplow would call it 'slightly superior.'"

"Heaven knows, I don't feel it. Well, yes, I do, in a sort of way," he added, with mild conceit.

"Yes, you are superior in some things. It's a question of values." And Lucy returned to her work.

Jack was alarmed lest he was not going to hear any more about himself.

"Now, that is n't fair, Lucy. You bring an

awful charge against me, and then go off calmly to grub for a little soulless dirt."

Lucy apparently gave no attention. Suddenly she looked up.

"I'm not sorry I'm a woman, but I think it would be a great thing to be a man. Men are so big and strong that the whole world belongs to them. A man can go anywhere he chooses and he can do anything he wants."

Jack nodded to Aunt Kiz, as much as to say "That's all she knows about it," but he was careful to interrupt with no comments. Lucy did not pause.

"When he knows what he wants to do most, he can give all his life solidly to it, until it goes through and through him and gets to be a part of him.

"Jack," she said, dragging her broom after her, for she had got up as she spoke, and coming up again before him, "you remember what a low, miserable fellow Jake Raum was before his brother was killed by the hay press and left the

care of his old mother to Jake? Do you remember how he went to work and stinted himself for his mother, because people would n't trust him and he could n't earn much? Now, that devotion and that self-denial shine all over his face. Everybody sees it and respects him. I think it was a fine thing for a man to really make himself over out of a noble purpose."

Jack hopped down from the table.

"You're a brick, Lucy. Good-bye. Good-bye, Aunt Kiz."

"Where ye goin', Jack Racer? You're draggin' my yarn after ye."

"To clean my face. Lucy's been telling me how."

Lucy resumed her work with less alacrity. Sweeping seemed a tamer occupation than she had thought it some minutes before.

"Jack thinks I was lecturing him. I wish I'd held my tongue," she said to herself.

Jack went down the street to his room with less than his usual jaunty air.

“She hit it off pretty neatly,” he finally exclaimed ; then added, more cheerfully, “I like to see a girl twirl herself about so daintily.” From which it was evident that Jack’s mind had veered toward its usual bearings, and he went whistling to his room.

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CHAPTER SEVEN



VII

A Thrilling Catastrophe Breaks Down

ACK'S room was in the upper story of Lawyer George's office, which was a small frame building in the corner of his yard, opening directly on the street. It was chosen by Jack that neither tobacco smoke nor boots might defile Aunt George's carpets and curtains. It was pre-eminently the room of a young gentleman of liberal tastes. One corner was burdened with a variety of hunting implements. A rack of pipes ornamented one side. The broad top of an old-fashioned bureau that once belonged to his mother served as a buffet. On this were several decanters, with attendant glasses. These had been bought with great circumstance by Jack at county fairs, and of glass peddlers, and always before an au-

dience which had spread each purchase far and wide.

Jack's works of art consisted of numerous highly-colored pictures of famous race-horses and of portraits of famous *danseuses* in phenomenal attitudes. Of the famous *danseuses* Jack knew little and cared less ; but they belonged to the ostentatious character of the room.

There were many young men in Pekin who would not have been seen coming out of Jack Racer's room in daylight. Jack remarked, with some satisfaction, that this saved him from intrusion. Amzi, Sam Limecooly, and Will Triplow had more courage. But they were always prepared to defend themselves from the assumption that they had been having a private orgy in Jack Racer's "scan'lous room, hung round with awful pictures an' a barrel of whiskey in the corner."

Jack took much delight in his room. There were outside stairs in the rear. But Jack had now come through the office, and brought up

with him several large books. Throwing himself on the lounge, he opened one of the books and read with apparent interest for some time, until he heard a scratching of gravel outside, interrupted by a dry cough.

"By Jove!" Jack jumped up and the books tumbled behind the lounge. "I promised Aunt George to help her with the beds. Well, 'Story on Equity' can wait. I've got enough for one dose. My mind is n't hefty."

"I'm coming, Aunt George." He ran down the rear stairs. "Why did n't you wait for me? My memory runs away, but it comes back, like Bo Peep's sheep, sooner or later, with all its appurtenances."

"I did n't know you were there, Jack, or I would have called. Idle fellow! I suppose you have been asleep. I should think you'd need it."

"Ground in," thought Mr. Racer. Outwardly, he rubbed his eyes, as if to get thoroughly awake for the business in hand.

Mrs. George, his uncle's wife, was a childless woman addicted to neatness and the keeping of flowers. She was considered aristocratic in Pekin, inasmuch as an asthmatic tendency kept her from much visiting, and also necessitated plenty of help ; and by the further fact that she had her dresses made in Chicago. This was merely a matter of convenience, as her sister, having her own seamstress, took the burden of deciding the fashions for Mrs. George and, in this way, also mitigated her own expenses. But Mrs. George, being a reticent woman, had never gone into these details, and with this Pekin was unacquainted.

She was very fond of her husband's nephew, but this was rather by way of her husband, the latchets of whose ties she adored. Her husband responded with a tenderness of manner and an ample weekly allowance. But further than the vestibule of his heart Mrs. George did not seem to have entered. Of this she

was ignorant, and was well content with his consideration and her spending-money.

Really, taking things matrimonial by and large, she might well be content; for, while most of the married women in Peking had the average amount of affection from faithful husbands, they usually did their own work, made their own dresses, had no private purses, and received scant conjugal courtesy.

"Jack, I want to sink this pot of amaryllis. The bloom shows so finely it seemed a pity not to bring it out. Your uncle thought so, too. It's usually such a shy bloomer."

"'Shy bloomer.' That's a good way to describe a girl I know."

"Who is it, Jack?" Mrs. George, like most childless women, had much interest in affairs of the heart, and her conversation with Jack usually ran on some phase of love, as exemplified by different Peking couples. Jack himself would have preferred wider generalizations.

"You're not going to have any secrets from your old aunt?" Not that Mrs. George considered herself old, but she regarded the adjective as peculiarly coaxing.

"Celia Blagden. You don't know her." This was by no means the truth. But Jack had found he could bridge an emergency in this way much more safely than he could evade pressing questions. His ready mind easily created Miss Celia Blagden, and he rather enjoyed her prompt existence.

"Did you get acquainted with her at Springfield, when you were reading with Squire Edwards? Do tell me about it," Mrs. George asked with active sympathy. But this Jack pretended not to hear. Though his conscience was of an elastic sort, he could not stretch it to give a lie its circumstance. Such subtle distinctions inhere in every one's morality and create individual standards which would be difficult of ethical explanation.

Instead of answering Jack stretched out his

arm, buried the tips of his fingers in the soft mold, and drew them along.

"Look, Aunt George, what a capital weeder my hand would make," imitating the little iron implement his aunt wielded.

"You have long, slim fingers, like your uncle. Your uncle has beautiful hands, but he's very modest about them. I've admired them so much he has stopped making gestures when he talks."

While Mrs. George and her nephew were entertaining one another thus placidly, more exciting events were taking place elsewhere.

Miss Burke and Anna Ross, coming out of the milliner's, met Billy Campbell running down the street.

"Have you seen Bob Wally?"

"No."

"Then he must be drowned. Boy drowned!"

Billy began to shout and run. "Boy drowned!"

Anna caught him by the shoulders.

"Billy, where?"

"Jones's mill. I'll go show you."

"No. Go give the alarm, and we'll run to the mill."

The girls started to run. Miss Samantha saw them from her window and ran across.

"What is it, girls? Has Billy Campbell been hookin' anything?"

"Bob Wally's in the branch."

"Goodness gracious!" Miss Samantha twisted up her hair and ran after the girls as fast as her carpet-slippers would allow.

"Mis' Bergan," she screamed over a back fence where that lady was washing, "Bob Wally's in the branch!"

Mrs. Bergan dropped her clothes and wiping the suds from her arms with her apron, climbed over the fence.

"Wait, can't ye, Samanthy? Mussy, I ain't got no bunnit." Mrs. Bergan untied her apron as she ran, and tied it over her head.

"In the branch. Mussy me! How we are snatched. Oh, Mis' Cain, Mis' Cain! Bob

Wally 's drowned in the branch." Mrs. Cain was trying on a dress body, but she snatched a shawl, buttoning her dress as she ran, and her daughter, ironing in the back room, joined the procession with her iron-holder in her hand. Down the side streets people ran, not knowing what was the matter, but confident that anything was worth running after, since stirring events were few. In a little while half the population of Pekin was on its way to Jones's mill. "If I was Mis' Wally," said Miss Samantha, "I 'd put off the funeral until Sunday. Mr. Sparkins might let up on Sunday school. Bob was a member, I suppose."

"I don't know, Mis' Wally was n't very conscientious in her trainin'. The children always went nearin' Christmas and festivals, an' Mis' Wally made as much fuss as them that went reg'lar if her children did n't git as much as other people's. It's fort'nit she got her new rag carpet home from Nance Weaver's. You an' me, S'manth', might help her git it down for the funeral."

"What in mercy's name are you luggin' that board for, Mis' Bergan?"

"I thought it might do to throw to the little feller."

"They've got more boards than water at the mill. I'd have thought you'd a-known that."

Jack threw up the handful of dirt he had gathered. "Look at the people, Aunt George. What's up?" Mrs. George shook the dirt from her dress and ran to the fence.

"Where are those people running to, Mr. Lime-cooly?" she asked of Sam hurrying past.

"Somebody says Billy Campbell has fallen into the water at Jones's mill."

Jack gave a leap across the fence.

"I'm off, Limecooly."

With long strides Jack gained on the crowd, and hurried past. By this time Irene and Anna had reached the spot with Billy Campbell, who alone caught Jack's attention.

"Billy Campbell, you limb, are you safe? I came to fish you out."

"Jack," said Billy, with long breaths, for he was very tired, "I think Bob Wally must be drowned."

"How, Billy? Tell me, this instant!"

"Bob Wally an' me was playin' on that very log. An' I went into the field to git a pole an' when I come back Bob was n't there, an' I guessed he's drowned."

"What in, you little imp? There is n't water enough, or I'd duck you."

Irene and Anna looked at the dried-up stream, then at the procession hurrying pellmell up the street, and sat down on the log, weak with hysterical laughter.

In the rear of all came Bob Wally, his freckled face streaming with perspiration.

"Why, Billy Campbell!" he cried. "They telled me you was drowned."

Down one street came the Campbells and up another ran the Wallys, and fell upon the children with kisses and blows.

"Billy, you precious limb!" said Aunt Kiz, weeping over him, after a final spank.

"What are you making such a fuss over Bob Wally's drowning?" inquired Billy, with some severity, after struggling to free himself. "Bob's got a lot of folks to cry for him."

"I thought it was you, Billy," answered the old woman, humbly.

"Oh, is that all?" said Billy, mollified. "I would n't have drowned. I'd a' just struck out for shore."

The crowd now slowly sauntered back to town, full of lively talk, but with an unavowed sense of disappointment. A break in the monotony of so small a town is too grateful to be relinquished without regret. If the unhappy accident had really occurred, both the Wallys and the Campbells would have had the unstinted sympathy and assistance of the whole town in accompanying it to its inevitable end. But even these sad services would have carried with them over several days an agreeable and stimulating excitement.

"What shall we do with ourselves?" cried Anna. "I'm as limp as a rag. I can't go back to my sewing."

Jack had joined the two girls.

Irene slowly raised her beautiful eyes to the young man standing before her, while a lovely, mysterious smile hovered on her lips.

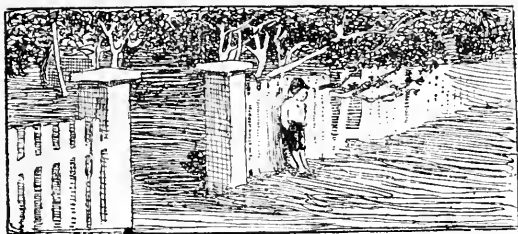
"Have pity on us, Jack," continued Anna. "Our occupation's gone. I'd nerved myself to break the sad news to Mrs. Wally, and I can't think of anything that will let me down safely but a dish of ice cream."

"Amzi's rig is hitched at Sam Limecooly's store and we'll find him somewhere near. Suppose we capture him; I'll get Fancy, and we'll go over to Sparta, have supper, and come home by moonlight. How will that compensate for Mrs. Wally's affliction?"

Jack turned to Anna, for, although he had been talking to her, his gaze had not left Irene's face.

Anna knew that she was destined to Amzi's

companionship, but in any case she felt a sense of rescue, and gave a glad submission to Jack's proposition. With but little delay the two buggies were whirling along the Sparta road, and at midnight, under the white moonlight, with loosened rein, Fancy came slowly home.



CHAPTER EIGHT

VIII

The Campbell Family's Views of Current Events



HE Campbells' supper was late. Mr. Campbell had gone over to Sparta to supply a missing piece of the hay press, and the B. M. & H., as it was familiarly called, took no account of Pekin's six o'clock supper. It was, accordingly, set for so late an hour as half-past seven, for in Pekin "men folks" are regarded as the only convincing reason for heating a kitchen stove. If Mr. Campbell had stayed one night in Sparta, his wife, Aunt Kiz, and Lucy would have taken their supper from their hands on the back steps, Billy being not yet old enough to require a table set.

The supper table was more than usually laden, the lateness of the hour and Mr. Campbell's

trip making it a special occasion. There were ham and eggs and fried potatoes, cold corn and beans left from dinner, hot biscuit, smear case, pickles, blackberry jam and water-melon preserves, two kinds of cake, and coffee.

The late supper was freely partaken of by Billy, who prospered under it to the extent of a second cup of coffee to finish his third piece of cake.

It was not usual to talk much at the Campbells' table until the close of the meal. Mr. Campbell, now taking up a piece of cake, was conversationally inclined. Tipping his chair back against the wall, he ate leisurely, lapping up the crumbs, as they fell on his shirt-front, with his tongue.

Billy watched him closely. Then, making, with difficulty, a crumb lodge on his calico blouse, endeavored to imitate his father's skill in removing it to his mouth.

Aunt Kiz pointed at him, and chuckled silently.

"Sho, Billy, you 'll have to wait until you 're a man to do that," said his father.

Billy made another supreme effort, turning his eyes almost out in order to see his tongue.

"Father, can you see your tongue?" he panted.

"Pretty near a'most."

"Aunt Kiz says God can see everything, so I reckon he can see his tongue; but I bet he can't see his own ears."

Mrs. Campbell, holding one hand to her cheek, walked around and gave Billy a box on the ear. Billy started up, but found the pain mitigated in seeing Aunt Kiz laugh silently and observing the drawn lines about his father's mouth.

"Billy," said Lucy, severely, "you are a naughty, irreverent boy."

"What 's that long word?"

"Something not very good."

"Did you get it out of the Bible?"

"No."

"Then I 'm not afraid of it."

“Billy!” It was now Aunt Kiz’s turn, for in Pekin admonition was handed around the circle, as a part of domestic etiquette. “Do you know what ’ll become of you if you don’t mend your ways?”

“Yes. I’ll have to go to church twice on Sundays.”

“That won’t save you. You ’ll go straight down to the bottomless pit.”

“Pooh!” said Billy, in some contempt. “That won’t hurt. There’s nothing there to strike against.”

Mr. Campbell slapped his knee with such force that his chair came down with a thud, and set the dishes jumping; but Mrs. Campbell made the tour of the table again, with uplifted maternal hand.

“None of you talk to this bad, bad boy any more. D’ye hear? Billy, not another word out of your mouth.”

Billy remained silent, but he knew he was master of the occasion.

"What 's Jack Racer doin' so much down at Sparty, nowadays? I saw him gallivantin' Irene Burke into an ice-cream parlor as I was goin' around the Palace Block."

"It seems to me I heard Irene had music scholars twice a week over there," replied Mrs. Campbell.

"Ho, ho! Then that settles it. Jack ain't got anything better to do than dangle around fine lookin' wimmen."

"I have n't seen Jack Racer for a month of Sundays."

"Who 'd a thought you were so vain, Sally!"

"You 're pokin' fun at me, Sam, but I 've a bealed jaw, and I 'm thankful I don't know what it's about, for I can't laugh."

"Lucy," said Aunt Kiz, having stolen a guilty look at her niece, on whose face the red was creeping up to supplant the white, "fly around and clear the table. Let 's git these dishes put away afore midnight. Let Jack Racer alone, Sam Campbell, he 'll come around all right."

"Keziah's allays for Jack Racer, since he was a little fellow."

"He never mocked my gray hairs."

"O, Aunt Kiz! And your hair is as black as a sloe." Lucy affectionately parted the black locks in which Aunt Kiz took secret pride.

"Well, he would n't have mocked them if they'd a been there. Jack allays had nice ways with old wimmen."

"Young ones, too, I take it, if the way the gals run after him is true," Mr. Campbell added, replacing his chair for a gossip, while Aunt Kiz and Lucy washed the dishes.

"You would n't go to the temperance rally last night, Sam, and you missed more fun than you could shake a stick at." Aunt Kiz paused, dishrag in hand.

"The Methodis' church was packed. I went with Loizy Merchant, and we set on the pulpit steps. Such a talker! Talked too much! Like molasses in winter, steady stream, no stop to it. He had a feller with him that spoke

a piece pretendin' to be a man with snakes, but rhymin' at every line. 'Laws,' says Loizy to me, 'I did n't know they talked potry when they had snakes.' She 's such a simple-minded creatur'. Finally, the fellow gave a whoop that would raise the dead, an' jumped right over Loizy's sunbonnet, and went screechin' down the aisle. 'Gone to perdition,' says the per-fessor. 'Behold the way of a man given to drinkin' an' wine-bibbin'. Who do you suppose is the master hand in workin' all this wretchedness in your homes. It is a woman,' says he. 'Yes, sisters, yes, brethren, a woman. The Widder Clikott comes a-dashin' along in her coach with her prancin' steeds. She trips up the steps of her brownstone palace on Fifth Avenue, and every stone has been bought with the price of a soul!' Oh, you never heard anything like the way he went on, Sam."

"Like as not it ain't true."

"Jus' wait. 'Sisters,' he says, 'arise an' con-

demn that woman !' An', would you believe it, Samantha Dyer began to hiss, an' fur a minit you 'd s'posed there was a hundred thousand snakes in that room."

"Ye don't mean it ! Was n't S'mantha Dyer cavortin' around old Jones, the distiller, at the Limy Fair ?"

"Well, sayin' as that woman, the Widder Clikott, is all he says she is, I really felt sorry for her, and I do hope to goodness she 'll never hear it."

"Like enough she will. They telegraph everything nowadays, since lines is let into every huddle of shanties."

"But that was n't what I was goin' to tell you when I set out. The perfessor had a big dictionary book longside of him, and a lot of bottles. 'Now,' says he, 'I 'm agoin' to make every sort of wine that 's drunk, out of them ingredjents, and you can see for yourselves jus' what sort of poison you 're takin' into yourselves.'"

"He mus' think everybody in Pekin has a wine cave."

"So he read out of his book, an' mixed an' talked. 'There,' said he, 'this is port, an' this is claret wine,' an' he named a lot more drinks. Then the young chap that went to perdition, an' had come back to take up the collection, passed the cups around the side seats. There sat Squire Martin, an' Doc Dennis, Lawyer Green, an' a lot of old coots. Sam, you 'd a died laughin' if you 'd a seen them cockin' their heads on one side, smackin' their lips, an' tryin' to look as if they knowed what port an' the rest of them tasted like."

"I don't believe they ever tasted anything stronger than hard cider in their lives," grunted Mr. Campbell.

"Just then Jack Racer come in, lookin' as peart an' sassy as ever you see him. He had on a new black an' white check suit, an' he might have been melted an' poured into it. 'Pass them to that gentleman,' said the per-

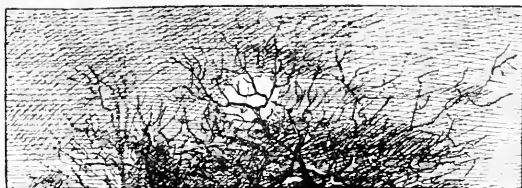
fessor, not knowin'. Everybody snickered. Jack tasted them all, jus' as cool, an' then sang out clear as a bell, 'They all taste like drug-store whiskey.' "

"That was a double-header, Kiz. How 'd Doc Dennis like that? "

"He fired right up an' everybody laughed."

"Served him right. Doc Dennis got the local option bill passed that took the trade in spirits away from Sam Limecooly, and gave it to his nephew's drug store. They do say that Doc 's a half partner."

"Well, this I know, my balsams ain't worth shucks for sprains this year all along of his worthless whiskey. Laws, Lucy, that boy 's noddin' his head off. Carry him upstairs."



CHAPTER NINE

IX

Lucy and Aunt Kiz Get Acquainted



BILLY had been fast asleep for some time, but he braced himself against the accusation.

"I heard every word you said. You're talkin' about Jack Racer." Billy's young but nimble reasoning powers had acted on the last word of Aunt Kiz's that he had heard, and immediately felt warranted in the statement, which proved to be correct.

"I tell you, Jack Racer thinks a lot of us."

"What makes you think so, Billy?" asked his father, looking at his wife for appreciation of their son's keen wit.

"He's allays askin' how we are. 'How's your father, Billy?' 'Is your mother well to-day?' 'How's your good Aunt Kiz?' All

except Lucy, he never asks for her, but I allays tell him. I ain't goin' to have Lucy left out of this family."

Aunt Kiz, who was gazing admiringly at the boy, sprang upon him with fervor.

"The dear lamb, the sweetest, best little boy in the world. Aunt Kiz will carry him up to bed. Lucy, get the candle."

Billy struggled manfully against the caresses, but consented to be carried upstairs.

"You was mad at me, wasn't you, to-night?" he asked, one arm around Aunt Kiz's neck, on the way upstairs.

"Well, yes, a little."

"But we've made up now, ain't we?"

"Yes," giving him a squeeze. "You know the Bible says we must n't let the sun go down on our wrath."

"Oh, it was long after dark. It was after supper that you all fought with me. But you liked it, did n't you, when I told you Jack Racer called you 'good Aunt Kiz'? And it was all just

guesswork with him. He does n't begin to know how goody, good, good you are."

Billy ended by throwing both arms around Aunt Kiz's neck, in one of his rare fits of demonstration.

Aunt Kiz pressed him to her breast, too much touched to speak.

Billy climbed down from her lap and began to undress.

"Come. Let me undo your galluses."

"I can undo them myself, or how 'd I get to bed if you had gone on the cars to New York?"

"But I'm not goin' to New York."

"Well, s'posin'. You might, you know. Then I 'd have to unbuckle my galluses myself."

"There's Lucy."

"Lucy's a girl. Girls don't know about such things. But you can untie my shoe."

"I'll bet it's in a hard knot. I thought so. Now, say your prayers."

Billy knelt down and was silent a long time. When he got up he explained, apologetically,—

"It takes a long time to take in all the relations, I tell you. Bob Wally ain't down but a minit, an' then whips into bed. He never takes in his cousins. He says they can do their own prayin'."

"Well, I'm glad you're a better boy."

"But I ain't, you know. He says he'd rather be a child of grace than spend the hours in idle play. That's what the teacher asked, an' I said I'd rather play!"

"Oh, Billy!"

"Which would you rather be?"

"A child of grace, of course."

"That's because you never played shinny. Now I'm ready for bed. Yes, if you want to, kiss me good-night; but we've kissed a good deal this evening."

"That's because we had a little difference, you know."

"Sure enough. Well, that's the last. You're a bully old Aunt Kiz," Billy shouted at her, from the bedclothes, as she went out the door.

Lucy was in an adjoining room, seated before an open bureau drawer. She had balanced her candle on the corner of the drawer and was pulling over her ribbons and trinkets, girl-fashion, and folding and putting them away again in highly-colored paper-boxes. Aunt Kiz came up behind her.

"Oh! Aunt Kiz, you startled me."

"What are you doin', child? Sortin' over your purties? That 's a cute thing," picking up a wooden shoe, gayly painted and adorned with ribbons, for the decorative fever had set in at Pekin, and its first evidence is the diverting of everything from its original purpose.

"Yes," said Lucy, absently, "Amzi gave me that at the Baptist fair."

"How is it Amzi ain't comin' here nowa-days?"

"He 's going to see Laura Francis."

"What do you keep them things fur?"

"Why, Aunt, they 're my earthly all. There 's

the locket Uncle brought me, and the bead-cushion you made me, and the melon-seed bag of Cousin Martha Bliss — ”

“Nonsense. I know ’em as well as I know you. I mean them stones and pebbles litterin’ up your drawer.”

Lucy was idly twisting around her finger a yellow string run through a hole in a shell.

“Amzi would have been comin’ here yet, if you ’d pitch away a lot of that trash and forget you ever had it.”

Lucy looked up reproachfully, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Lucy, darling, forgive me. I did n’t mean to speak rough. But I want to see you well off and happy, and sometimes it’s just the thoughts that stick to stones, and dried flowers, and simple things, that make us let our real happiness go by without knowing it. You ’ve always been such a good child, doin’ your duty in season and — ”

“That ’s just it.” Lucy shut the drawer and

stood up. "Tell me how to keep from doing my duty. I hate my duty."

"Why, Lucy!" Aunt Kiz started back. Just then two girls passed under the window, laughing loudly, one tossing a saucy answer to a voice up the street.

"Listen to that. They are happy. What would I give to laugh out free and careless like that!"

"Fine time of night to be traipsin' around. Purty mothers they must have."

"But they are happy, Aunt Kiz. That's the chief thing. I would be willing to be scolded by you, to have Uncle swear at me, and Aunt Sally cry over me, to be happy and laugh like that."

Lucy had caught her aunt's arm in her vehemence, holding the candle in her other hand. As its flickering light chased the shadows over her face, Aunt Kiz realized for the first time that her niece had beauty. The girl had always been too near to her. Now, her face

alive with emotion, an unknown fire shining in her eyes, Lucy impressed Aunt Kiz like a new person. She was too intent on the strangeness of this thought to reply at first.

"Tell me, Aunt Kiz, how not to do my duty."

"I can't, Lucy. It is in you. You can't get away from it."

"Then I will never be happy," she said in despairing tones, and, releasing her aunt's arm, sat down again.

"What is the matter, child? Why do you look at things in that way?"

"Can I not see, Aunt Kiz? It is to the thoughtless, the careless, the selfish, that everything comes."

"Everything what, child?"

"Everything worth having. Oh, I've thought it all out. I've tried, too. I left the milk pans unwashed the other evening, and went out to walk. I never made my bed yesterday; I just spread it over until evening. But what good did it do?" She laughed hysterically. "I was

only wretched. I came upstairs every little while, to make it ; and then went down again. I was bound to give it a good trial." And Lucy laughed again with such lack of mirth that the tears came to Aunt Kiz's eyes, and, throwing her arms around Lucy's neck, she sobbed on her shoulder.

"Lucy," she said, wiping her eyes, "you are your mother's child. Whatever is right for you to do, you will do; that, bless God, is your fate, struggle against it as you will. Listen, Lucy. I was strong-willed and high-strung, I went and came, nothing stood in the way of my pleasure. Your mother was all that I was not, — a good daughter, a loving sister. Lucy, she died young, but before she left us she had been a happy wife and mother. Child, child, I would sell all the years of my life to have had one sip of the brief joys of your mother."

Aunt Kiz was on her knees before Lucy, her slim form bolt upright. Lucy got down beside her.

"Dear Aunt Kiz," she murmured, "we love you so much," stroking her hand.

"Let me alone, Lucy." Lucy set the candle on the chair, and sank back on the floor. Aunt Kiz got up and began to pace the room.

"Yes, I would sell my soul to have been a wife and had babies about my knee. I was all for pleasure; I played with the love of good and honest men, and then threw my own into the dirt. Now, what have I left? A lonely life, a hungry heart, a bitter tongue!"

"No, no, Aunt Kiz! Don't!" Lucy put her hands before her eyes.

Her aunt came up before her.

"Put down your hands, Lucy. For the first time in my life, I am showing these bleeding wounds, and because I hope the sight may help you. Courage! Look, child. I never see a child clinging to its mother's skirts, that they do not bleed afresh. I never see a wife look into her husband's eyes that they do not sting. Even when I see Aunt Chloe and Uncle Jack

warming their tobacco side by side, I want to wring my hands and gnash my teeth, for black or white, rich or poor, the sweetness of affection is the same. O God, the years that I have borne it ! But it is not all in vain, if I can only serve you. Look, child, look, and if your life seems homely and your duty a burden, remember me as you see me to-night, and as, please God, no one shall ever see me again."

Aunt Kiz sank into her chair, faint from emotion, and burst into bitter weeping. Lucy crept up to her, fearing to speak, but pressing her cheek against her aunt's knee.

They sat silent thus for some time. Finally, Aunt Kiz grew calmer.

"There, dear, we was strangers, after all, until to-night ; was n't we ? Now, let us go to bed."

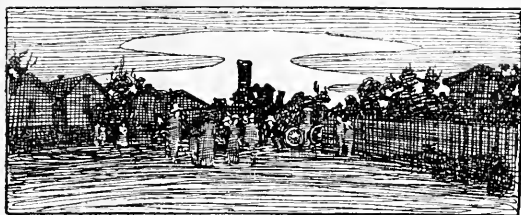
Lucy still clung to her.

"Aunt Kiz, you have crucified yourself for me, and I thought I was not selfish."

"You are a dear, precious girl. Not a word now. Go to bed."

The two women separated without any more words. After their lights were long out, Aunt Kiz cried from her room :

“ Lucy, if we was two men, we ’d take two stiff whiskey toddies and go to sleep like babes. But we ’re only wimmen, and we ’ll have to wrastle it out.”



CHAPTER TEN

X

A Fire Gives Opportunity for More than Heroism



T last they slept. When tear-worn women have at last found peace in the blessed oblivion of sleep, all earth should conspire to keep silence. And so it seemed. Pekin now lay motionless under the dark blue sky. Not a light glimmered, not a footstep sounded in the street. There is no stillness more profound than that of a slumbering village.

At length, far up the street, a hoarse voice shouted "Fire!" The sound came nearer, and a man rushed by, still shouting "Fire! Fire!" Windows were thrown up; heads thrust out. But the man paused for no questions.

Lights glimmered here, there, and now from every house. Doors slammed, men hurried forth, taking up the fearful cry.

Then came the clangor of bells. The Baptist, the Methodist, — quick, rapid strokes, ceasing only when the hand on the rope paused to gain strength to begin again.

Heavy sleepers, fresh from dreams, sprang up in the darkness at the frantic sound, and women groped the way to their children's beds.

All Pekin was now aroused. Every man was a member of one of the two fire companies. Trousers and boots made a toilet. Women hurried into their clothes, fastening them in the street. Children followed them, clad in what they could find, crying, "Mother, mother, wait for me!" as they dressed themselves on the way.

The whole town was now on the street, the church bells pealing, men shouting, the engine and hose bells clanging as they rolled through the town, drawn by the long lines of men ;

women and children now running in their trail toward a faint yellow light creeping up the blue sky.

Aunt Kiz put her head out of the window.

"Where is it, Samuel?" calling to Mr. Campbell, hurrying out, buckling his suspenders as he went.

"It looks over Wally's way."

"Lucy and I'll go. Sally can mind the house."

They soon had joined the hurrying crowd, running as they went, and pausing only to take breath.

"Keziar, d'ye s'pose it was set afire?" panted Mrs. Bergan, behind them, her nightcap surmounting a toilet consisting of a short gown and quilted skirt.

"I don't know yet what it is, Mrs. Bergan."

"Why, it's Wally's new house. Like enough, like a lot of shiftless people, they take up their ashes o' nights, an' I should n't be surprised if they emptied 'em into a bar'l settin' close up to the summer kitchen," said Miss Dyer.

"I allays use an iron pot ; it 's temptin' Providence to use wooden vessels for ashes."

"As if Providence was a-firin' the roofs over our heads, in the night too !" exclaimed Miss Samantha, with pardonable contempt.

"But does n't that spile 'em for soap ? Certingly, if they 're put fust in a bar'l, there they are, needin' only to be histed to run off the lye. I s'pose that was Mis' Wally's idee."

"The people that goes for savin' trouble has the worst of it, mark my words."

Lucy and Aunt Kiz began to run again, and the ladies followed them.

It proved to be the Wally residence. The back part of the house was in flames and their glare irradiated the neighborhood. Neighbors were carrying out the furniture, and tearing up the carpets. While the men bore the heavier articles, the women carried the dishes, ornaments, chairs, and lighter furniture to a secure place across the street.

Here Mrs. Wally sat, crying and wringing her hands, on a pile of feather-beds.

On the adjacent houses, men climbed along ridge-poles in their stocking-feet, spreading blankets which they kept wet with the water that women handed up to them.

There were no public cisterns. Fences were levelled, and the hose was carried over bushes and garden beds to the neighboring wells and cisterns.

The elder men worked in lines at the engines, and the younger men carried the hose, scaled the porches, climbed through windows, and their dark forms could be seen outlined against the fierce, roaring background of flame, and dimly seen among the chimneys of the roof.

No better spectacular arena could be desired for the display of personal courage. The conditions were all picturesque, the flaming background and eddying clouds of smoke, the costume, the white glazed hat with its gayly-painted ornament and sheltering back, the flan-

nel shirt and black belt with its gilded fastenings, the high-topped boots, into which the trousers were thrust ; and below, the eager, excited audience noting every movement.

A fire was, in fact, recognized as the great opportunity for the Pekin young men ; and they vied with each other in deeds of daring. At each fire the generous rivalry between the two fire companies grew afresh. Jack Racer commanded "The Dreadnought," a trim little engine with its inspiring legend, "We fly to save." The older, more sedate engine, with its Latin motto, "*Fortitudo inspirit spem*," was commanded by Horace Morton, a young married man, who now felt new duties toward himself, being an even younger father.

The fire had crept steadily over the roof in the face of a steady stream from The "Dreadnought," while "The Reliance" charged inside. The men were driven back, pace by pace, until only Jack and Sam Limecooly remained on the roof. Sam supported the hose, bracing

himself against the chimney, and Jack, abandoning his trumpet, held the nozzle, one foot against the eaves trough, and kneeling on the steep gable.

Below, women were shrieking, and men crying, —

“Come down, boys! Save yourselves!”

“How d’ye feel, Limecooly?” asked Jack.

“Warmish. We might as well git.”

“Scoot, then. I’ll follow. There’s a fiery serpent nibbling at my boot.”

Sam climbed down the waterpipe on to the trellis, and leaped to the ground. Jack let himself down to the veranda roof, yet untouched; everyone breathed freely. Then, suddenly, he darted through a window into the burning house. A wild cry of horror went up below. But it was only for a moment. Jack reappeared with a bundle in his arms, followed by the flames from the roof, which fell in with a crash, and sent a stream of sparks and burning bits skyward.

His burden was Billy Campbell, whom he had seen, in night-drawers and boots, calmly walking around looking for something. "My God!" he exclaimed, and jumped into the room. He still held Billy with one hand, and with the other climbed down the frail ornaments of the pillars.

A crowd ran to meet them.

"Never mind. It's all right," waving it off. And he hurried away.

"Jack, what did you hurry me so for?" Billy asked, finding his breath once more.

"You imp, what were you doing there?"

"I was huntin' that Sparkins boy's velocipede. I let Bob Wally have it; and I was 'sponsible. Sparkins asked me how much money I had in my savings bank, and I told him, five dollars and fifty-six cents and a fi'penny bit; and he said then he'd lend me his velocipede, coz if I broke it I could buy him another. So I was 'sponsible. My, but you're nasty and wet! An' I let Bob Wally have it. I

did n't know he 'd go an' burn it up. I was savin' that money to git me a gold watch an' chain."

Aunt Kiz was working at one of the engines, the women having replaced the now exhausted men. Screened by the lilac bushes, she had seen nothing of the excitement, where all was excitement.

Jack called to her, —

"Come, Aunt Kiz. I want to unload."

"Billy Campbell, as I'm a livin' sinner!" She let go of the pump and ran.

"He's been hunting his velocipede in Wally's house, and stayed so long he had to scale the clapboards."

Aunt Kiz fell upon Billy with expostulations and kisses, and interrupted Billy's explanations by turning him over and upside down to see if he was hurt.

Jack found her a wrecked sofa, and, putting Billy in her lap, escaped the throng of women gathering about them.

Part of the established routine of a fire of importance at Pekin was coffee for the worn-out men. This duty fell to the girls. They had accordingly hung a gypsy kettle. Anna Ross was tending the fire and Irene Burke grinding the coffee. Lucy had been sent to hunt up some of the Wally cups to serve the occasion. Wrapping her red knit shawl over her head to guard against the burning shower, she started toward the rescued furniture on which Mrs. Wally still sat enthroned, weeping, and surrounded by sympathizing friends. The fire was now past danger, but the falling timbers and the roar of escaping flames, the flying sparks and clouds of smoke, made it seem even more terrible.

Lucy shuddered, and drew her shawl closer as she ran past it toward the Wally cairn.

"Lucy, is that you?" said Miss Dyer. "I 'd a-thought you 'd been supportin' your Aunt Kiz."

"Aunt Kiz is working at the 'Reliance.'"

"Indeed she's not. She's shudderin' like a fit of agur. Did n't ye hear?"

"Hear what?" half turning her head, and looking up from the basket she was filling with the cups strewing the ground.

"How Jack Racer jumped into that burnin' gulf after poor little Billy?"

Lucy heard no more.

"There, she's forgotten them cups, gal-like. Gals is hasty. I'll take 'em an' git a cup myself. I've an awful gone feelin'."

Lucy ran, without seeing or caring, toward the burning house, leaping the hose, splashing through sheets of water. As she turned the veranda column, there stood Jack.

"Jack! Billy!" she cried, and fell senseless in his arms.

Jack lifted her up and carried her away from the burning house to the shelter of the lilacs. There he held her for a moment to his breast, and bent his head toward hers.

"No," he said, shutting his lips tightly; and,

with head erect, he bore the unconscious girl to Aunt Kiz, still sitting with Billy in her arms, and placed Lucy by her side.

"Some fool's been frightening her," he said, roughly.

Aunt Kiz looked up at his white face and shining eyes. In spite of his tone, she caught a new note in his voice.

"Take care of her, Aunt Kiz," he said, tenderly, with shaken voice.

The old woman caught his hand and pressed it.

"Jack," she said, as he turned, "if you can only find Samuel and carry him here, I'll have the whole family. Sally's home with a bealed jaw."

They both laughed, and Jack walked off.

Lucy lay with her head pillowed against Aunt Kiz's shoulder. Presently she stirred, and finally, coming to herself, she felt a sweet content, and tried to remember how it came about. When she remembered, she hid her face again, lest even in the now waning light

of the burning house, Aunt Kiz should see her joy.

"Come, Lucy, we might as well get home. This bad, bad boy has gone to sleep."

Lucy turned her head; and, as she turned, she saw by a leaping flame, Irene Burke handing Jack a cup of coffee, the girl blushing and handsome beneath his gaze.

She turned cold and sick again.

"Yes, Aunt Kiz. Let us go home."

A well-conducted fire at Pekin concludes very much like a picnic. This of the Wally house was one of the best of its kind. The tired men hurried home to catch some sleep before daylight. The women, now at leisure to coax and cuff, gathered their broods together and drove them before them, as they gossiped on the way. The small boys stole away one by one to help drag the engines and hose-carts back to the engine-houses.

A few firemen kept watch over the dying remnants bursting out now and then in sudden

flashes, and still capable of mischief if neglected, in the rising wind. The young people sat and made merry over their coffee until the morning began to dawn, when the young men walked home with the girls, and Jack Racer lingered over the gate with Irene Burke.

"You are better looking than ever by the dawn, Irene. I believe this is the only time of day that I have n't inspected you by before."

"And you are flattering as ever. Really, there is very little variety in your comments on my personal appearance."

"That is scarcely my fault. But you look as fresh as if you had n't been up half the night." He leaned back, holding her off with both hands and scanning her close-fitting dress, every detail of toilet complete.

"Everything is so trim and taut about you."

"One need n't go to a fire like a drab."

"Yes, you are one of those women that would have a hanging dress, if they were going to be hanged."

Then, looking off where the sun was rising, a golden ball above the billowy grass of the prairie, he murmured to himself, —

“ ‘The sweet disorder of her dress,’ ” and, turning, peered into Irene’s face with all the force of his gaze.

“ Why do you look at me that way, Jack ? ” Irene asked.

“ I am trying to quench a memory. ”

“ Your speech bewrayeth you. You ’ve been handling the hose, ” turning up toward him her smiling face.

For answer, he gave her a long, lingering kiss.

“ Did you quench it ? ” she murmured.

“ Damn it ! No, ” he said, and strode away.

“ Jack, ” she called after him, “ remember, at eight o’clock to-night. I want you to teach me poker, ” then went, well satisfied, into the house.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

XI

And Leaves Jack Racer Unaccountably Capricious



IF Jack Racer had not been a privileged person, he would have gone back to the engine-house after the fire, as did the other members of the company.

Instead, he went to his room over the office and threw himself, in his wet clothes, across the bed. At length, after much tossing and swearing, he went to sleep.

It was nine o'clock when he awoke, a "scan'lous" hour in the opinion of Pekin, and only to be tolerated in emergencies such as that of the night before. Jack got up and made his usual careful toilet. This attention to his person, as well as his late hours, was one of the grievances against him in some circles in Pekin, where a hasty wash of the face and a rapid brush of the

hair sufficed until evening, when everybody was supposed to "dress up."

Mrs. George, with her usual indulgence, always kept Jack's breakfast until he was ready for it. This morning, in view of the events of the night before, she attended him in person. She saw, as he came in, that he was not in a communicative mood, but she felt by judicious questions, such as a lawyer's wife would put, that she might elicit something of interest.

"Ann and Caroline can talk about nothing but the fire this morning," she began, while daintily serving his coffee.

"I don't doubt."

"Poor Mrs. Wally! She must have felt awfully at having her new house burned down." Jack looked up, and saw he was expected to answer.

"Yes, she did take it pretty hard. If she had only begun soon enough her tears might have put out the fire."

"Ann says you acted liked a hero; and as for

Caroline — ” Mrs. George clasped her hands expressively.

“ Ann and Caroline are two gabblers.”

“ Jack, you know they both adore you. Now, for all you take it so, you know it is a great thing to have saved a human life.”

“ Bother, Aunt ! I beg pardon. It was only Billy Campbell.”

“ Well, Jack, even he ’s human. Of course you could n’t know it was only that bad little boy.”

“ Oh — oh, no — o,” said Jack, significantly.

“ I thought it was the Reverend Mr. Sparkins’s son.”

“ He ’s in Chicago, with his mother. I thought you knew that, Jack.”

As she spoke, Mrs. George got up, and, going to Jack, began to examine him critically.

“ What ’s the matter, Aunt George ? A smooch ? ”

“ Ah ! ” She gave a sigh of relief. “ I am so glad you are not disfigured in any way.” But he reassured her.

“Of course, Aunt, when I’m saving lives, as a rule I always think about that first. I’ll take care not to spoil my phiz, you may be sure of that.”

Mrs. George shook her head doubtfully, as if, in the reckless enthusiasm of youth, he might forget.

Jack himself knew he would very much dislike getting disfigured in any way, but he did not say so; and, touching lightly his aunt’s forehead, left the room.

Jack went back to his own room, pulled down some large books bound in yellow calf, and, resting his head on his hands, with his feet stretched out under the table, he was soon apparently absorbed. He did not read long, but, quite involuntarily, found himself standing before a picture in the gallery of celebrities he so ostentatiously displayed, criticising a certain curve of outline.

“Ugh!” he said, shivering, when he came to himself; and roughly turned the picture to the

wall. He went back to his reading and for some minutes was attentively engaged. Suddenly he exclaimed, —

“The Lord have mercy on my soul!” Jumping up, he walked around the room quickly, looking for something, he knew not what. Presently his eye caught the well-filled decanters and handsome appointments. He poured out a finger of whiskey and put it to his lips.

“No, I’ll be hanged,” he said. “I’d moon all day.”

He threw himself on the lounge for an instant.

“It’s no use,” he exclaimed. “I can do nothing here. I’ll put the distance to Sparta between.”

He went to the stable. Fancy neighed softly as he came in, and rubbed his shoulder. He gave her some lumps of sugar from his pocket, and the mare rubbed with her nose again, inviting new caresses. He quickly harnessed her to his trotting buggy, and was off.

The road lay a dead level. Jack braced his feet against the dashboard and pulled his cap over his eyes. Fancy was used to her master's whims, but she was never harder pressed.

Jack came into Sparta with his usual dash. The women ran to the windows. The girls on the street plumed themselves, and looked to see if he noted them. The men commented with more or less friendliness. The small boys regarded him with appreciation, and felt that to grow up like Jack Racer ought to satisfy any mother's ambition.

He drew his mare up before a drab-colored office-door, at its side a dingy sign.

"Hi, Jack!" a portly man greeted him. "I did n't expect you. I heard you had a frolic last night."

"Bit of a blaze. I've come for work."

"You'll have the afternoon clear. I'll be in court."

Jack went in, found the book he wanted, sat down in the Judge's chair, with his feet on the

table, and began to read. He was elated with his success.

"Can't do anything at home," he muttered. Apparently his success did not bear contemplating. He grew restless, and finally persuaded himself he was hungry.

Putting aside the book, he went out on the sidewalk and delighted old Jake Durstine with stories while he ate a watermelon with him, on a store-box.

"But I can't swap lies here with you, Jake. I've got work to do."

"Fust time I ever heerd on it," Jake grunted. Jack felt that this conversation had, at last, freed him from his persistent thoughts. He now not only read with interest, but made some notes and hunted out a reference or two. But in time this zeal flagged.

"I am hungry," he said. "Watermelon is not filling for the price, as we say in the classics." Closing the books, he went over to the Grand Union Hotel in the Palace Block. He looked

in the dining-room. A small girl sat at the end of a long table filled with people. Pulling a string, she set in motion a row of wire trapezes ; from these fluttered banners that once were white, but which still kept up a gentle breeze while they waved away the flies, swarming elsewhere, from a double row of men and women hastily devouring their dinners.

Jack watched the small girl with some amusement. As she pulled her banners with one hand, with the other she held surreptitiously below the table a story paper she was endeavoring to read. Occasionally, absorbed in her story, she forgot her string. The breeze died away ; the flies sallied in ; and the heads down the long line looked up, missing something, and finding much. Then, recalled to herself, the girl jerked the string violently to make amends, and the women's frizzes and the locks of the men waved to and fro until she relaxed again into a steady swing.

"Old Heliogabalus feeding was n't a patch to

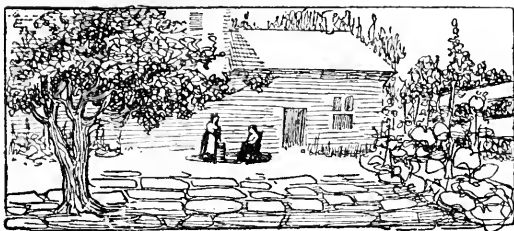
Sparta for luxury," Jack said to himself, "but I'm not old Heliogab." And he turned on his heel and went out.

The "Home Circle" was near, the saloon of the highest *ton* in Sparta, and he went in there and began to rattle the balls about the crazy billiard table. Then, more disgusted than ever, he went back and settled himself to his work.

At intervals he groaned, but kept his chair persistently. Then suddenly, in the midst of a long sentence on *torts*, without any consultation with himself, the book was shut, Jack Racer stood up, put his hat on, and was at the door. He did not stop, but hurrying to the shady side of the street, where Fancy was tied, he unloosed her halter, and before he had communed with himself he was speeding homeward as fast as he came. When at last he took thought, he said, —

"It's only for once," begging concession to his own weakness.





CHAPTER TWELVE

XII

Aunt Kiz Invites Him In and Then Invites
Him Out



WHEN Jack reached Pekin he turned Fancy's head to the Campbell door. Fastening her to a locust-tree, he knocked and then, with scant ceremony, entered. Finding no one, he pursued his way through the house into the kitchen, where, hearing voices without, he poked his head through the kitchen window. "Jack Racer!" screamed Aunt Kiz.

"Yes, I've called to get my thanks for saving that boy of yours. You did n't pay me that civility last night. I suppose it's a mere form, but in any case I would like it."

"Sally's gone to the dentist. If she was here she'd throw her arms around you. As it is, if you'll come out hyar I'll do my best."

"May I?" He turned to Lucy with unsuspected shyness.

"Yes, you are just in time. Aunt Kiz and I have seen so much of one another to-day, we were about to quarrel for a change."

Jack caught the mutual look of love and confidence between the aunt and niece, and for the moment felt very lonely.

"What a jolly place this is!" he exclaimed, as he got himself through the window, so as not to disarrange its fringe of pans.

The Campbells' back-yard was an attractive spot. The summer kitchen was a roughly-boarded afterthought, but it was overhung with hop-vines swinging their golden bells in perpetual call. The surrounding area was paved with flags, kept clean as a kitchen floor. These enclosed an old apple-tree, which brought such protecting shade that half the household duties were performed here.

Aunt Kiz now sat in a low rocking-chair, peeling apples to stew for supper, and Lucy

stood under the apple-tree, churning. No detail escaped the notice of so accomplished an observer of women and their setting as Jack Racer.

Her print dress was turned up over a white skirt neatly frilled. A white fichu crossed on her breast and a blue silk handkerchief was bound turban-wise about her hair, in view of the particular work in which she was engaged. Behind her was the grass plot, with its fruit all gathered but the russet pears ; the old well, mossy and weatherstained ; the hollyhocks marshalled against the fence ; and still beyond, the garden with its flaming dahlias and marigolds against the yellow corn.

Jack flung himself on an old settee placed against the house. As he watched the dasher dancing up and down, and saw the flashing of white arms, and heard the gentle plash, plash, so soothing to his lately perturbed spirit, he patted his self-indulgence lovingly, and was very content.

“But how busy you are! Can’t I dandle that thing up and down?”

Aunt Kiz raised a warning hand.

“Butter is like women and mares, they know the touch of their master.”

“Would it get skittish if I took a hand? Now, Fancy — ”

“Lucy woos the butter right out of the cream, sir. If you want to do the proper thing, you ’d read to us out of some improvin’ book.”

“And keep my eyes glued on to the page? No, I thank you.”

“Then you can put a stick of wood in the stove to keep the fire in.”

Jack flew to obey her. As he reappeared, she said, —

“You ’d be always in the kitchen if you had a wife.”

“That would depend on who the wife was.”

“For all your wild doin’s, you ’re a reg’lar Betty.”

“I ’ll swear to one thing. At the risk of being

unfashionable in Pekin, if my wife cooked the breakfast I'd chop the wood and make the fire."

"Pekin wives don't have the heartache."

"No, but they all have the backache."

"T' other 's worse."

"Look here. Does n't it occur to you that if a man looks after his wife's back, that it is a sort of collateral evidence that he cares for her heart?"

"You talk very fine," she smiled, grimly.

The consideration of matrimony was always an agreeable subject in Pekin, as in other towns, small and large, and Jack was quite willing to continue it. Lucy did not take part in the conversation. Notwithstanding her cordial welcome, there was a shyness in her manner that impressed Jack. But he felt he had gained much if he might sit there where he could watch her movements not too obviously.

It was very cunning, he thought, to see her peer into the half-opened churn, and, with her head poised on one side, consider judicially the situ-

ation within. Her whole attention was apparently contained in the area of her churn. He watched to see some trace of interest in her face, and did not despair of bringing smiles by some happy audacity that he might safely practise with Aunt Kiz.

Thus, all the time he was so merrily talking, he was thinking of Lucy, likening her to this, that, and the other.

"She is like a young pine," he thought, "slender and straight from the ground up,—so pliant and yet so strong.

"She's like a snowdrop, — modest, shy, and pure.

"She's like a snowbird, — so brave, hardy, so grateful for a few little crumbs, — and so cold. But I would n't have her otherwise. Oh, no, no!"

Jack's thoughts did not get beyond conventional comparisons. But he was not a young man who in such matters strove for originality. He used his mental powers in the easiest way.

These similes expressed his feelings, and that was all he required of them.

"It has come," said Lucy, gravely, taking off the lid of the churn. She lifted the butter in a mass into a wooden bowl, twirling the dasher around dexterously, to catch the floating bits.

"Give Jack some of the buttermilk, Lucy."

"Do you like buttermilk, Jack?"

"I was brought up on it."

"That accounts," said Aunt Kiz.

"For what?"

"A sort of frothiness I've noticed —"

"And elasticity, and vivacity, and wholesomeness in my character. Quite right," he finished for her.

Lucy stooped to lift the churn and Jack sprang to his feet.

"Not when I am here," he said, decisively, and sent the foaming mass, like a cataract, into a cool stone jar. When this was done he resumed his lazy attitude, and received a glass from Lucy's hands, like a pasha.

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"Not when I am here," he said, decisively, and sent the foaming mass, like a cataract, into a cool stone jar. When this was done he resumed his lazy attitude, and received a glass from Lucy's hands, like a pasha.

“Ye gods ! What a drink ! ”

He quaffed again and again, partly for a love of the buttermilk, which is a worthy motive, but chiefly to be so served, — to have Lucy stand before him, to watch her raise her pitcher aloft, and, bending toward him, fill his glass with such dainty precision. There was a proud humility in her mien that delighted him ; and he prolonged the situation as long as his capacity for buttermilk held out, and then relinquished it with a sigh.

Released, Lucy went back to her butter. She wielded now a short wooden paddle, pressing it to and fro against the yellow mass.

There is muscular force in this as well as deftness, — a sort of concentrated energy quite disproportioned to the apparent motion, and which sends the blood leaping through the veins like a young race-horse.

Jack watched the rise and fall of the muscles in the firm white arm with the admiration of an expert, but soon found more bewitching the

advent of a little brown ring creeping out from under the blue turban.

It is an unwritten law that the hair must not be touched during this household rite. So the crisp little ring strayed away down Lucy's neck and curled around her ear. A slight movement of the head at length showed consciousness, and then a gentle toss, as the audacious curl ventured into her ear. Jack watched it with a fascinated gaze. The lock was more insistent, the maiden more uneasy.

Jack was trying to parry Aunt Kiz's merry sallies, but was consumed within with a frantic desire to touch that curl. Could he not offer to tuck it back? That was only kindness. Dared he? He braced himself for the offer, and then backed down. He rallied, and then retreated. He reasoned, he argued. He called himself unpleasant names. The idea! A slip of a girl, and he, Jack Racer.

Meanwhile the curl wandered at will. It waved to and fro; it beckoned and then mocked him.

Thusgoaded, Jack made a sudden move. There was a sound in his throat. But he coughed and settled himself again.

Aunt Kiz looked up.

"Are ye sittin' on a bumble-bee's nest, Jack Racer?"

For a moment her keen eyes were fixed on him. Then she arose and went over to her niece.

"I'll tuck yer hair in, child. It's botherin' ye." Then she went to her apples, looking at Jack with a grim smile.

Jack met her gaze bravely.

"You remind me of Beelzebub's wife," he said.

"I know she smiles just like you."

"Then Mrs. Bel is a mighty smart old woman."

She nodded, decisively.

Unconscious of the cause of her aunt's and Jack's passage at arms, Lucy finished her butter and packed it away in a little tin pail. Then she took from a nail a coil of rope and, with the pail in her hand, started to the well.

“You shan’t prevent me now,” Jack said defiantly to Aunt Kiz, and followed her.

Lucy swung the pail on the side of the well.

“This is our ice-house, you know.”

“And what a pretty looking-glass!” Jack stood by her and saw their two faces in the cool depths of the water.

“There we are, Lucy, we two away off in a little round world by ourselves.”

He bit his lips and stopped.

“See here. Don’t you get enamored some day of your own face in the water, like that heathen chap, and fall in.” He spoke lightly, but the tension of his voice revealed the pressure put upon it.

Lucy did not answer, but leaned over the well to adjust and fasten her pail. The worn boards gave a warning sound beneath her weight.

“My God!” cried Jack, with all the possibilities flashing before him, and, throwing his arm around her, held her fast.

“It is nothing, Jack,” Lucy said, when she

could speak ; but as she looked up her eyes were filled with tears ; not from fright, but from the sweet, rare sense of protection.

“ It is something,” said Jack, angrily. “ Why don’t Sam Campbell have a decent well ? Billy will fall in some day.”

“ Billy is n’t allowed to come about the well. He knows if he should get drowned, he would be whipped.” Lucy laughed through her tears, but her serenity was gone. Jack, with his mind troubled and his soul stirred, went back to Aunt Kiz and expended himself abusing Sam Campbell and his well.

“ Ye talk like the agent of a new-fangled pump,” she responded, dryly.

“ You mean like a member of the Humane Society.”

“ Lucy ! ” she called, “ it ’s time to be gittin’ supper. Come,” to Jack, “ I ’m goin’ in now. No, this way.”

“ I suppose I am not to be invited to tea ? ”

“ Jack, ye could make your livin’ guessin’.”

She started for a side-door.

"Good-bye, Lucy," Jack called, as he followed Aunt Kiz.

"Good-bye, Jack," she answered, without re-appearing.

Aunt Kiz followed the young man to the street-door and shut herself out on the doorstep with him.

"Look hyar, Jack Racer," she said, "I don't want you comin' round hyar any more afternoons." He looked at her. "Young men like you ought to be at work," she added, as an afterthought.

"Aunt Kiz, you know you don't care two pins whether I work or play. Is there anybody else you would rather come here?"

"Yes," she laughed, "if that's it. Amzi." Jack sobered.

"If Amzi's company is wanted here, he shall come, I promise you that. But who wants him to come?"

"I do. That's enough."

"That 's not enough," said Jack, positively.

"I say it is n't enough, Aunt Kiz. Does anybody else want him to come? "

"That 's none of your affair. I want him."

"Plainly it is my affair, if I am not to come. And I tell you now, he shan't come. That 's flat."

"You young dook of Pekin, I 'll be even with ye."

"What is more, I want you to remember that you have turned me out of the house and if I go to the devil it is your fault."

"I wash my hands of you," she retorted, turning to go in.

"Aunt Kiz!" Jack stopped her. "I 'm going to tell you something. You're a woman though, I don't suppose you 'll understand it."

"I 'll listen, at least," she replied.

"I came to your house this afternoon just as a man who is going to reform takes his good-bye dram,— a long one and a strong one. Now I 'm going to swear off."

“I’m sure we’re mighty obleeged to ye for the comparison,” she answered, indignantly.

“I knew you would n’t understand,” said Jack, sadly, and went his way.

As he went he mused, —

“If I was willing to undertake the risk of spoiling her life, I’d have to court Aunt Kiz first — grim dragon that guards the entrance to the enchanted castle.” The fancy seemed to please him. “Bally old girl.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

XIII

The Professor and the Cantata of Esther



HE announcement that the Cantata of Esther was to be given in Pekin became at once the absorbing topic of conversation.

Professor Perry Stivers had been for some time overlooking the field, as he called it.

Professor Stivers was a slight man with a sallow complexion suggesting malaria and coffee. He had beady black eyes, curly black hair, and a profusion of whiskers. The discrimination between beards and whiskers is not recognized in polite circles in some parts of the country. But although fine distinctions were not usually observed in Pekin, this was in force.

Professor Stivers had whiskers. These were long and flowing, and in moments of preoccu-

pation he assisted his mental processes by dividing them into two strands and knotting them together.

Professor Stivers always wore broadcloth, and both his clothing and mien were related to what is termed "the cloth." In fact, although primarily a singing teacher, he was also a composer of hymns. Both of these occupations gave him a claim on churches and their congregations and obviated the necessity of hiring halls or undergoing the expense of a hotel.

But few of what are generally called "amusements" ever visited Pekin. In the first place, it was too small to tempt them. And in the second place, Pekin held positive views on the right and wrong of worldly amusements, — by which is to be understood that interesting quadrilateral, the theatre, the opera, dancing, and card-playing.

Occasionally some passing "Swiss Bell Ringers," or "Old Folks' Concert" gave an entertainment in one of the churches. The

“dressin’ up” in the latter was at first held to be debatable, seeming to suggest the theatre. But the matter was settled by a general understanding that the clothes had been handed down from past grand-relations, which made it a family matter. As for the “Swiss Bell Ringers,” everybody knew they dressed in that foolish fashion “to home.”

It was not that Pekin lacked that refreshment of spirit that amusements are expected elsewhere to give. On the contrary, small places are at a less disadvantage than would appear, since, thrown on their own resources for entertainment, they unite the pleasures of the performers to the delights of the performances. There were such social occasions as “spending the day,” a method of passing pleasantly the time of which older and larger communities know nothing. This consisted of several ladies combining to descend upon a friend at ten o’clock in the morning, taking their work and those children, picked out of the united

families, that either could not be left at home, or would find companions in the house to which they were bent. There they remained for dinner and stayed for tea.

Such visitations entailed an enormous amount of labor, and until dinner was served the hostess was rarely visible. After dinner, however, when the dishes had been washed — some of the guests usually assisting and all offering their services — visiting set in fast and furious, and tea was but a slight interruption. Spending the day had this advantage: when it was over, it was over for a long time. The hostess, meanwhile, had grounds of retaliation on each of her guests in the same manner, before they could with propriety spend the day with her again.

There were also tea-drinkings, and evening parties christened after whatever fruit, melon, berry, or other form of tempting the appetite, happened to be in season, as if the meeting was only called to allure the palate. It was

really the same old game of men and maids, and as perennially attractive in its humble celebration at Peking, as in the more sophisticated ways of more pretentious places.

There were fairs for the firemen and fairs for the Peking band, fairs for the church carpets, and fairs for the heathen. There were, as we know, camp-meetings and other occasions for picnicking; there were temperance orations and missionary meetings, Sunday School celebrations and donation parties.

Every event in Peking proved a diversion. Even the occasional auctions, and immersions in Martin's pond gave occasion for assembly and comment.

The Cantata of Esther was quite outside of these. For a time Peking was off its reckoning. The name, in the first place, was puzzling.

In order to get the Methodist church, which was the largest in Peking, it was necessary to have the good-will of the congregation. There

were, of course, certain nominal heads, but these would never think of acting against the consent of the congregation, or even without its assent. The matter was accordingly generally canvassed, and nowhere more exhaustively than in Mrs. Bergan's back-yard, where she and Miss Samantha Dyer were making soap on the "sheers," Mrs. Bergan furnishing the lye and Miss Dyer the grease, the kettle having been borrowed.

As Mrs. Bergan and Miss Dyer were sisters in the church, they had a right to their "say," and were now in the full plenitude of their powers.

"Folks is purty bad," said Miss Dyer, chasing a piece of ham-rind around the kettle with her stick, "but I did n' think they would be so blasphemious as to write an opery about Scriptur'."

"But they tell me it ain't an opery. It's a cantaty."

"'T ain't a hair's-breadth difference 'tween

them. Both of 'em is caperin' roun' in false clothes. Throw in another handful, will ye?"

"As fur caperin'," Mrs. Bergan said, as she obeyed, "I heerd the perfessor say they jus' held up their hands now an' then, an' walked roun' singin' the very Bible words. 'T is n't as if they throw'd themselves roun' in a furrin tongue sayin' nobody knows what at ye, like enough things you 'd blush to hear, an' you innercent an' helpless-like sittin' there."

"Well, my opinion is, an' I 'd say it if it was the last words given me to speak, that if the Good Man meant us to sing Scriptur' He'd a-set it to a sol-fa-do book."

"But I ain't got it clear in my mind about the Psalms, Sister Dyer."

"I ain't no use for Psalm-singers, either," not catching Mrs. Bergan's thought, which referred to David and his harp of solemn sound, and not to a neighboring sect. "Psalm-singers have onnateral ways. There was Eliza Ann McCaskey, she was a seceder, an' she allays would

have salt-raisin' bread, even when hops was plenty."

"The perfessor says Solomon's Song was undoubtedly meant to be sung, else it would be Solomon's something else," suggested Mrs. Bergan, who, having a daughter who sang second in church, was inclined somewhat toward the new prophet.

"Oh, the perfessor!" said Miss Dyer, who, not being prepared to answer this, prudently made her views a mere matter of emphasis.

"Myry says the clothes they're to wear are the wonderfulest things, all velvet an' span-gles, an' not a scissors set in 'em, as she could see. Jus' hang on some way, as if you was a peg."

"An' flyin' open, I make no doubt. Such con-ductions! Nobody need n't tell me that dressin' up an' actin' out of theirselves ain't goin' to work the devil's way in this community. It stan's to reason that it encourages vain an' deceitful ways."

"Well, well. There 's truth in what you say, I don't deny."

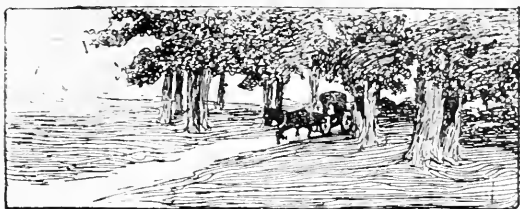
"You know yourself, Sister Bergan," said Miss Samantha, sitting down on the woodpile while Mrs. Bergan relieved her of the soap stick, "that perfessor, as you are, in good an' reg'lar standin', ef you was to put on hity-tity clothes an' go cavortin' roun', you'd git very light-mannered."

"As ef I'd do sech a thing! Me wearin' mournin' fur Bergan now this ten year!" Mrs. Bergan exclaimed, with some hauteur.

"*Ef*, I said; not meanin' you would ever bemean yourself that a-way, an' we neighbors boilin' soap together."

"Well, it won't be so bad for them that 's per-tendin' Esther and her uncle. Maybe it might be a means of grace to some. But I would n't be in that old Haman's or his wife's shoes fur a purty."





CHAPTER FOURTEEN



XIV

Mrs. George is More Biddable than She Knows



IN higher circles the discussion was as animated, if different. Mrs. George never mingled in the affairs of Pekin, but she would have taken it hard not to have known how they prospered.

Now, seated at her window with her needlework, this mild October afternoon, she looked out from the dying clematis, still bravely trying to wreath the window, as if unwilling to acknowledge that its reign was over and summer gone, and saw Jack coming in the gate. She had seen very little of him of late. He spent his days in Sparta, coming home late; when, after some hasty refreshment, he was off about his lighter affairs. To make up for this apparent desertion, Jack was more than usu-

ally tender and thoughtful of his aunt when he was with her. He was especially considerate of her health.

“You are n’t in the open air enough, Aunt George,” he said one day. “Your cheeks are paler than I like,” stooping to give each a gentle kiss, which brought to them a gratified flush. “Those horses are eating their heads off. Old Pomp is as gentle as a baby, why don’t you have him in the phaëton every afternoon and take a ride?”

“Your uncle, you know, can never go with me, and I don’t like to drive,” she plaintively answered.

“Get some women, they ’re a great deal nicer than men. There is n’t one of your kind in town that can’t drive. But you ’re such a proud body. You ’re gracious, but you have a stand-off way that makes everybody stand off—except me, who am a burr on the hem of your dress. Why don’t you get thick with some of the Pekin feminines? I should think you ’d

like to have some nice girl looking up to you, and petting you. There's nothing prettier than to see two women cooing. Of course, from your position, you'd have to make the advances. They would n't presume. Now, there's Laura Francis — ”

Jack looked up, for while he was getting off this speech he was sitting on a stool at his aunt's feet, plucking at her dress like a schoolboy.

“Jack, I can't stand that girl. She puts on so many airs since she's been at boarding-school in Chicago.”

“Then we'll try another. Give them all a turn and then pick out your girl. That's the way I do.”

“You?” said his aunt, secretly flattered by his well-directed words; and, bending over him, gave him a little prick on the nose with her cambric needle.

“Yes. I've had experience. I'm a judge. Give me the commission,” dodging her aim and imprisoning her hands. “I'll hold until you

heed. Let me choose a group for you. There's Miss Burke — ”

“ Oh, that 's a girl I don't think I like. She's a man's woman. She overpowers me.”

Jack bent over and kissed her hands.

“ As if you little women could n't hold your own anywhere, and did n't command the tallest Goliaths of us all. Well, there 's Anna Ross.”

“ Yes,” said his aunt, “ there 's Anna.”

“ And there 's Mr. Campbell's niece.”

“ Yes, she 's pleasant-spoken and modest.”

“ Then why not try her?” said Mr. Jack, jumping to his aunt's conclusion. “ Of course, you know, you could take her first, and then ask some one else if you find — that is, if you don't want to be too particular in your attentions. It would n't do, of course, to make the rest of them jealous,” he concluded, less fluently.

“ I suppose not,” agreed his aunt, amiably.

“ Now, Aunt George, say you 'll go this afternoon,” said Jack, eager that she should com-

mit herself. "Jake's gone to the farm, but I'll hitch up. We can't begin too soon to woo those roses back," concluded this politic young nephew. Thus it had been settled.

Now she called to him, and he came bounding over the still blooming beds of asters and made a place for himself among the vines.

"Are they going to get the Methodist church, Jack?"

"Yes. I knew they would. Did you have a nice ride, Aunt George?" he asked with flattering interest.

"Yes, very. Then I suppose Mr. Sparkins has given in."

"He always meant to. How far did you go, Auntie?"

"As far as the camp-meeting ground. Jack, who's going to be Esther?"

"That will depend on the girls' lungs. They're going to speed them to-morrow. Did you find it very dusty?"

"Oh, so-so. I suppose Irene Burke will have one of the best parts?"

"I suppose so. Anna was in her usual gale to-day?"

"Oh, I did n't take her. By the way, Jack, if Anna does n't get a good part, there 'll be trouble."

"I don't doubt the fur will fly before they get through. And so you had courage enough to drive alone. Brava, Aunt George," said Jack, returning to his charge.

"I certainly did n't. But, Jack, are you going to have anything to do with the Cantata?"

"I suppose I 'll fetch and carry for them. I certainly don't suppose I 'll have a tenor solo."

"Oh, Will Triplow will get that. See here, Jack, I did n't know you were so fond of music. The other evening your uncle and I saw you at Mrs. Maule's window. Miss Burke was playing then, and when we came back, although we did n't see you, she was still at the piano."

"Yes, and if you had come in, you would have found me lying on the sofa on my face. Music is very good to think by."

"Does Miss Burke allow you to stretch yourself so?"

"Oh, Irene's kind," he drawled, lazily. "But tell me, Aunt George, are you feeling better? I prescribed, you know, and I have something at stake. Your eyes are bright. There's nothing like the open air and good company."

Jack worked himself up to quite a pitch of enthusiasm.

"Yes, I've enjoyed it very much, and especially to-day. But tell me, Jack, is Professor Stivers a married man?"

"Confound the whole business!" muttered Jack, kicking the dry earth with his heel.

"Aunt George, I'll come in and tell you everything I know."

Jack went in, and taking the straightest-backed chair he could find, he placed it before his aunt and sat down erect and with folded hands.

"Professor Stivers is a married man and a profoundly familiar one, too. His wife will be here to-morrow. I don't know her maiden

name. The Cantata of Esther is a musical drama written by some musician who was presumably a good man. It is in great repute among people who won't go to the theatre. But there are others, notably Miss Dyer, who regard it as the cloak of heaven worn to play the devil in. The performance will take place October 15th, and will be held at early candle-lighting in the Methodist church. Miss Burke will undoubtedly appear as Zeresh, and Mr. Triplow as the mournful Mordecai. The professor himself will be Haman. For Esther there are several candidates, chiefly Miss Anna Ross.

"The chorus will include every one who is young, pretty, and can sing. Even I have been invited. Considering the high character of the performance, the tickets will be placed at fifty cents, children half price. I don't know that I can think of anything else." Jack paused, Mrs. George looked up inquiringly, and Jack went on :

“That is, about the Cantata. But I’ve heard something else. Sarah Boice, it seems, loaned Jane Maybury a sample of goods that she got from Chicago, and Malvina Pryor borrowed it from Jane Maybury and took it to Sam Lime-cooly’s store to see if he could get her some at the same price. Then Sam took the sample and sent it to St. Louis. So when Sarah asked Jane Maybury for the sample, Jane sent to Malvina Pryor, and Malvina had to confess that she had given it to Sam Limecooly, and Sam sent it to St. Louis. Now Sarah had not wanted Sam to know that she had sent in a free and easy way to Chicago for samples, for the Lime-coolys and the Boices belong to the same class-meeting. So she upbraided Jane Maybury, and Jane Maybury reproached Malvina Pryor, and Malvina sassed them both. Each lady then left in tears, and now they don’t speak. As for Sam, he says nothing, but I know he feels deeply.”

“Those women are always quarrelling,” said Mrs. George, deeply interested.

"Now, Aunt George," said Jack, springing up, and with a certain definiteness in his tones, "whom did you take riding to-day?"

"Why, Lucy. I thought I told you before."

"Sure enough," answered the young hypocrite.

"You take her all the time, don't you?" he asked, with evident satisfaction.

"Yes, she is a real nice little thing, so merry in a quiet way, and has such a pretty, grateful manner that it's a pleasure to do anything for her."

Jack put his arms caressingly about her.

"What a good little woman you are! I don't fancy that girl has any too much pleasure in life, and it is mighty fortunate for her she has found such a friend. One can feel so safe about a girl in your hands," he mumbled, with his head on his aunt's shoulder, feeling that a somewhat arduous task had at last been crowned with success.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

XV

The Cantata Proves the Mother of Discord



PROFESSOR STIVERS'S wife came the next day. She was a meek little woman with small, straw-colored curls in front of her ears. Her eyes seemed to have been originally blue, as now seen under a cloud of yellow film. She was accustomed to follow her husband whenever he had secured a field for labor in any of his various capacities. In the Cantata she performed the manual labor, the unfolding and refolding of the costumes, the taking in and the letting out, the unpacking and the repacking. Her husband did not encourage her coming; on the contrary, he spoke of it in conjugal conversation as "tagging on." He would have willingly hired a substitute, or risked enlisting

some of those ladies whose voices the Cantata did not require.

Mrs. Stivers was not offended at her husband's plain speech ; in fact, she supposed it to be that usually current between husbands and wives. She liked going about and meeting new people. She was proud of the triumphs of the Cantata ; and above all she delighted in seeing her husband in the rich robes of the haughty Haman. He was her ideal prince, and she was very happy to be the wife of a man who in his gilt crown and velvet clothes might have well consorted with Queen Victoria.

The day of the voice trial, as it was called, came off. The choruses had been learned by all the available singers in Pekin, and had occupied the leisure evenings for two weeks. The difficulty of casting the Cantata arose from the competition between the different choirs, each feeling that if it secured the best or the greatest number of parts its future superiority would be established.

To Miss Burke came the easy conquest which usually falls to persons of large and luxurious personality. By common consent she was given the part of Zeresh. Will Triplow seemed equally foreordained for the plaintive Mordecai. Haman belonged to the professor. It was not so easy to dispose of Esther. Anna Ross wanted the part and meant to have it; meanwhile there were several other girls who might reasonably indulge a hope. There were also several smaller parts, — handmaidens, heralds, captains of the guard, with their various attendants. For each of these there were several candidates.

But the first thing was to dispose of Esther. The professor knew of Anna Ross's expectations. He had no objection to her voice, which was the largest and clearest in Pekin, but her vivacious manners did not accord with the professor's idea of the gentle Esther. In this he was correct, for an Esther of Anna's temperament would readily have disposed of

the recalcitrant Vashti. But to himself the professor confided the fact that he did not take to Anna Ross, and as there was a good deal of rehearsing, he preferred to have somebody agreeable to himself.

He was immensely satisfied with Miss Burke, with whom, in the Cantata, he was especially allied. But that was no reason he should not have another pleasing person in the cast. For this reason he had instituted his voice trial, that he might inspect the possible Esthers critically with his black and beady eyes.

Anna Ross did not mind all this preliminary. She was perfectly sure of her own mind and if the professor wanted "to fool round, and the girls were silly enough to think they had a chance," as she put it, she did n't care.

Now, in the middle of a group which included Irene Burke and Jack Racer sitting lazily in the end of a pew, Anna was in high spirits, commenting on everything that went on, and

freely on the essays that were taking place at the cabinet organ.

Lucy was seated by Mrs. Stivers, who was taking in the neck of Mordecai's robe of woe, to meet the slender demands of Will Triplow's neck; even here she did not escape the professor's searching glance.

"We are not through with our gentle friends yet," he said in a manner which if not arch failed in its intention. "Our nest is full of song-birds this year," expending on Lucy his most winning glance. "And not one shy warbler shall escape," he continued, directing his words to her more expressly.

"Come, Miss Lucy. No hiding behind our wife's skirts. Our eyes are sharp and our ears are quick to hear the sound of music in a maiden's voice," he persisted, in a style formed on his familiarity with the language of the Cantata.

Professor Stivers's speech did not fail to arrest the attention of the room. The girls ceased

talking. Jack Racer moved uneasily in his seat.

"Make him stop! Oh, do make him stop!"

Lucy whispered to Mrs. Stivers. "I can't bear to have him talk and look at me that way."

"Make him stop?" said Mrs. Stivers, in a bewildered way, not knowing how to receive the inference of authority on her part.

"Yes. Everybody's looking. Tell him to hush."

"Tell him to hush?" murmured Mrs. Stivers.

"Yes, quick! Tell him to shut up!" insisted poor Lucy.

"Oh, but you must go. You must go when he speaks. He'll stop then."

At length, under all this distressing attention, Lucy went blushing down the aisle.

"Alleluia! We have won her!" cried the professor in high glee, circling his hand in the air as he had taught his chorus to do in the grand march, and as Lucy passed around the cabinet organ he put his arm around her

waist in his semi-parental and professional manner.

"Impudent puppy!" Jack muttered, and springing from his seat, walked over to a small footstool and kicked it viciously. Then he went outdoors, where his foot recorded in violent twinges the excess of his rage.

"So help me, how I hate music," he said, as he walked rapidly down the street, until the sweet sounds that came floating through the church windows could no longer be heard.

Irene Burke was not unconscious of the cause of Jack's sudden flight. For some time she had understood that young gentleman's moods and vagaries, spasmodic devotion and coldness, more clearly than he admitted to himself. She knew perfectly well her own power over him, and how to exercise it. She knew why at times he yielded so willingly and again why he resisted. She looked now at Anna's clouding brow.

For the first time Anna Ross felt doubtful of

the easy success of her plans. Lucy had finished, and the professor, patting her on the shoulder as she hastily moved away, exclaimed unctuously :

“We will see, ah ! we will see. This voice needs a little strengthening here, a little urging there, but the jewel is in the casket, the bird is in the cage. Shall we let it out, shall we allow it to try its wings ? Ah, that is the question.”

“Lucy has n’t much voice, but she would look the part.” Irene turned to Anna.

“It is n’t that at all. Professor Stivers wants her. He knows very well that my voice is a thousand times better. But he wants her.”

Lucy had gone back to her seat and the professor stood looking after her.

As Anna said, he wanted her. There would be a satisfaction in training this shy young thing that he could not hope to find with Miss Ross, who very likely would undertake to train him.

"He does not know her position at Campbells'," suggested Irene.

"Well, we all wash, iron, and cook, except you."

"But we don't take money for it. That makes all the difference in the world between a lady and a hired girl."

Anna did not answer, but stood in moody silence.

"Professor," called Irene, with an imperative nod of the head, such as is not unbecoming a pretty woman.

"My spouse calls, I must obey," cried the professor gallantly appearing before her with a low salaam.

"Really, we ought to get to work. I am frightened already," she said, with a becoming little shiver.

"What, the haughty Zeresh knoweth fear?" throwing up his hands in eloquent appeal to heaven to sustain his incredulity.

"I suppose," said Anna, "when you've been

through all the kitchens and stableyards you'll be ready to go on."

The professor understood nothing more than that his hour had apparently come.

"Oh, Haman and Esther is only another version of King Cophetua and the beggar maid," laughed Irene. "Miss Ross is alluding to your last candidate."

The professor rallied.

"Really, that little lady has quite a good voice. I consider it particularly, Miss Burke, because it would blend so admirably with your rich alto in that elegant quartette, 'What shall be done with the man whom the king delighteth to honor?' I have to think of the *ensemble*, as every man must do that gives up his life to his art." The professor congratulated himself that this was a very neat way to clinch his determination, which was now clearly formed. But the professor did not estimate rightly the resources of women who also have their minds clearly formed. Irene felt her domination threatened

in two directions. The professor's view of his art had not deceived her.

"Well, you see Lucy is n't exactly one of us, and it seems sort of funny, if you want the Cantata to go off with *éclat*, to give her one of the best parts."

"You grieve me, really," said the professor, more determined than before. "She seems very decent behaved."

Anna laughed contemptuously.

"Irene talks too fine for you, Professor. She only means Lucy is a hired girl, and Miss Burke is n't accustomed to singing with people who wash dishes for a living."

"Stop that!" said a quick, rough voice behind them, where Jack Racer stood with Will Trip-low. "Fine womanly sort of talk! But don't let us have any more of it."

"Indeed, Jack, it was n't I. It was Anna," said Irene hastily, crimsoning under Jack's rebuke.

"You lie, Irene Burke!" And Anna, at bay,

Jack's blazing eyes confronting her, raised her hand and brought it down in a resounding slap on Irene's cheek.

The significant sound called the attention of the entire room. The sudden silence became appalling. The tears rolled down Irene's cheeks. Jack was stony, but the sympathetic glance of the professor met her eye, and she laid her head like a child on his shoulder and sobbed away.

Still no one spoke, until Will Triplow heroically cast himself into the yawning gulf of silence.

"Ahem! Don't you think we are going to have rain, Professor? As I came in just now I thought I saw clouds in the sky."

Jack turned on his heel, with a short, brutal laugh, that caused Will to gaze with wondering reproach after him, as he moved away.

But Will's honest endeavor had performed its mission. The silence was broken and the noise of many voices arose, discussing the situation.

Jack Racer walked down the aisle to where Lucy and Mrs. Stivers sat.

"Why is Miss Burke crying on my husband's shoulder?"

Mrs. Stivers asked, not because she thought of objecting to Miss Burke's crying on her husband's shoulder, but only stating it as a part of the fact, and with that insistence on details which some people observe.

"Oh, some woman's row. It will soon blow over."

"Lucy," said he, "I met Billy Campbell just now, and he told me that his cousin Sarah Jackson and three other cousins have come over from Lima, and Aunt Kiz said she didn't know what she would give them to eat. So I've brought the news to you, for I fancied Aunt Kiz wanted you."

"Oh, poor Aunt Kiz, she is all alone. Aunt Sally is laid up with her jaw. I'll go right away. I've been gone so long," she added reproachfully, gathering up her needles and thread.

Jack felt satisfied, but not wholly satisfied. He meant to see her safely out of the door, at least.

"Lucy," he said, as they walked to the door, "you don't care about this thing — the Cantata — do you?"

"Why, no. I only fill in. I thought I'd help that poor Mrs. Stivers, she has such a lot to do."

"I wish you'd help me. You see, I've let Aunt George in for a lot of work. I've promised she shall make the colored paper rosettes to trim the church, and I know she depends on you to help her. I can't bear to have her disappointed, because she seems to have taken a sort of fancy to you."

"Jack, she's been so kind."

"But, you see, if you help her you can't be at rehearsals."

"I don't care. I'll be glad to get out of it."

"Then I know she has been rather depending on you to go to the performance with her.

Log chains and oxen wouldn't get Uncle George there, and of course I have to be snuffing candles and turning down smoking lamps all evening." Jack laughed in an unnaturally hilarious manner.

"How nice of your aunt to think of me! Of course I'll only be too glad to go."

"Then good-by. It's all settled."

"Yes. Good-by."

"Geewhillikins, won't I have to manage Aunt George about those rosettes!" said Mr. Racer to himself, as he ceased from watching a blithe step around the corner.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

XVI

A Situation More Perilous Than it Seems



THE performance of the Cantata surpassed expectations. Nothing that compared with it had ever before been seen in Peking.

The little disturbance that for a time threatened the harmony of the occasion was easily allayed by giving Anna Ross the part of Esther. To this, after Lucy's withdrawal, the professor had no objections.

Now that Anna had gained her end, the temporary check to her plans and some shame at her exhibition of temper, made her quite charming. She gracefully consented to speak first to Irene, a thing which from childhood she had vowed never to do, and her degree of amiability must be estimated from her previous standpoint on the etiquette of making up.

During the rest of the rehearsals the two girls were ever seen with their arms around one another's waists. As Esther, Anna now showed a chastened demeanor that accorded well with the character, and might easily have been taken for acting.

Anna had a conscious feeling that she was not quite herself, and enjoyed the sensation. In truth, all the performers began to suspect in themselves newly awakening talent that only needed exercise and encouragement to bring fame within easy reach. Such belief in possibilities contained for them greater sources of comfort than any fulfilment can ever hold, since all chances of failure have first been eliminated. The Cantata was given several times. Many people came even from Sparta, where there is an opera house in the Palace Block, which, being attached to the Indianapolis amusement circuit, was in the track of performances on the road.

This was an honor that no one had anticipated

and set the final seal of approval on the performances at Pekin.

The delights of wearing false clothes had not been exaggerated by Miss Dyer. Charades were revived and flourished as never before, until an ambitious attempt to get up a charade, published with stage instructions in the Lady's Book, was begun.

In the professional "*asides*," "*exits*," and mysterious initials, some discriminating souls found sources of danger that did not exist in the go-as-you-please charades to which Pekin society was accustomed, and the town was soon involved in a new discussion of morals. That they were not wholly wrong was seen in the fact that occasional barnstormers now came to Pekin and found audiences respectable in size, which listened to them with cold and critical expressions of approval and disapproval. Jack Racer had resumed his daily journeys to Sparta after the quarrel of the girls, keeping out of the way with that discretion which many

a man has learned before Mr. Racer, and which all men find easy to practise.

But Jack did not fail to be on hand when his services were needed. On the evening of the performance his zeal for the lamps, his management of windows, his gallantry in piloting matrons up the crowded aisles, in tucking away children, his cleverness in finding seats for late comers, his ready tongue and ready smiles, performed valuable service in keeping the house in good humor until the usual vicissitudes on the stage finally allowed the curtain to go up. After the Cantata was over, it really seemed that Jack Racer had, as it were, carried the whole performance on his shoulders. Certainly, his share in the success was out of all proportion to that of those who had borne the heat and burden of the occasion, and especially to that of Will Triplow, who had nearly smothered under the weight of Mordecai's neckcloth. Irene Burke kept up her lessons at Sparta and, as usual, came home with Jack in the cars, or be-

hind Fancy. But at Pekin Jack's absence had left the professor an easy field.

One warm afternoon shortly after the performance, as Irene came by the Palace Block she saw Jack coming out of the court-house door. Linger- ing, ostensibly to inspect the festooned rib- bons, chains of collars, and boxes of ruching and other feminine gear in the broad and imposing windows of the "New York Store," in order that Jack might see and overtake her, she saw him joined by a group of lawyers, each of whom shook hands with him amid a general air of good fellowship.

When released, Jack hurried across the street. There was a smile on his face and less of his usual alertness of manner. Evidently he did not see her. Irene watched him with some curiosity as he came toward her, and felt a cer- tain and unusual remoteness.

"Jack!" She placed herself in his path. "Come down from the clouds."

"You, Rene?" the smile flitting. "Clouds?"

No."

"It is Thursday."

"Sure enough. I was n't thinking of it by that name. I suppose you are ready to go home."

"Yes, I hurried. Have you Fancy? I want you to take me the old road."

They went silently to the shed where Fancy was stalled, and Jack handed her into the buggy.

"Jack," she asked, "what was all that hand-shaking about in the court-house yard?"

"Congratulations," he answered briefly, snapping the purple blossoms from the dusty iron-weed.

"On what?"

"On my having swallowed a certain amount of law without perceptible injury."

"Is that what you've been coming to Sparta for?" She looked at him as if prompted by a sudden thought.

Jack nodded.

"You have kept your secret well," she said, with some bitterness.

"You would n't want me to advertise probable failure or possible collapse?"

"Oh, you'll never fail. You'll always get what you want." Irene looked away.

"I hope so, for I'm conscious of several wants."

"Have you had them long?" She turned again.

"They're young still, but they're growing," throwing up his head joyfully.

"Jack, Professor Stivers thinks I'm foolish to give lessons," she said, after a time.

"What does he suggest? Cantatas? Your Zeresh to his Haman?"

"What do you think of it?"

"The question is what do you think of it — of how much you can stand." Jack, who was bending over, his arms on his knees, turned and looked up into her face.

"It would be easier than hammering music into louts of children. Besides, Jack, it might be a stepping-stone."

"Oh, I don't care a fig for your cold-blooded

arguments. Your instincts ought to be sufficient."

"My instincts! What have they got to do with it?"

"That can't be argued. If you don't feel the truth of what I say, all my newly-acquired right to plead can't convince you."

Irene bent forward. Beneath his gaze were her beautiful eyes, her full, rosy lips. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Try, Jack."

Jack raised his head.

"You'll soil your glove. My arm is covered with dust." Their eyes met, and Jack's serene face left Irene with a cold, sickening sense of failure.

As Jack turned away, pretending some need of Fancy's, the blood crept into his face. He felt as if he had been using a dagger and shrank guiltily from the sight of the wound.

But Irene mistook his manner and her courage revived.

"Jack, you did n't approve of the professor's devotion to us girls." She laughed lightly.

"It did n't seem to be so much a question of morals as of taste."

"Oh, you 're a man."

"Yes, at last," he said, as if to himself.

Irene turned and gave him a quick look, but Jack was dislodging a horsefly from Fancy's flank. She sank back again into her seat, and a look of determination brought out unsuspected lines about her pleasure-loving mouth.

"Jack, what is the matter with you? Are you jealous of the professor?"

Jack laughed a low laugh.

"By Heaven, you do him too much honor."

"You are very arrogant. The girls all wanted his notice."

"How could that concern me?"

Irene bit her lips, and impotent tears rushed to her eyes.

"It was you who got Lucy to withdraw," she said, making blindly for her fate.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because," Jack sat up once more and looked at her. "Because I did n't mean she should stand the insolence of you girls, or be pawed over by that greasy Stivers."

"If you are so awfully careful of her, I suppose you mean to marry her?"

"I think too much of her for that," Jack answered, leaning again on his knees.

Irene began to cry silently. Jack did not look up. He heard no sound, but he felt her silence was being employed in that way. It was not a comfortable position. Jack had a shivering dread of tears but none of the impatience at their gentle flow that is supposed to be a characteristic of his sex.

Bent over, he could almost realize their soft patter on his back. He wished she would n't, but his ear was alert to catch the faintest sob, although he knew it would oblige him to take more obvious notice of their fall.

He felt her grope for her pocket, and knew why she required her handkerchief. It seemed to mark a stage in her grief. He felt like a hypocrite, and called himself a spy, scorning the ridiculous thought that he was spying with his ears. They caught a hasty swallow, a significant sound in Irene's throat.

"You made me say it, Irene. I never admitted as much to myself before. But I've said it. It stands."

Irene's silent tears broke into low sobs. Jack could stand it no longer. He turned to her tenderly.

"Don't cry, Irene. The — the occasion is n't worth a tear," he said modestly.

She did not answer, but put up her hands to screen her face.

Jack drew them gently down. The quivering mouth, the teardrops hanging from her long lashes, her brilliant eyes shining through their veil of tears, gave Irene a more entrancing

beauty than she had ever possessed in her more confident moods.

Jack realized this as in a swift vision, but it left him unmoved. As he stroked softly her imprisoned hands, Irene's head fell on his shoulder and she broke into violent weeping.

He took up her handkerchief, now moist with tears, and laid it reverently down. He then drew out his own and tenderly dried her eyes. Irene submitted for a moment to his soothing touch. Then the scarcely perceptible fragrance of Jack's handkerchief recalled associations, and a wave of emotion swept over her. She snatched the handkerchief from his hand and pressed it violently to her lips. Jack raised his hand in deprecation, the blood rushed to his face and he blushed like a girl.

They were approaching the cross-roads, the sparse wood half screening, but only half screening them. As they turned, Fancy taking her own gait, some people with curious eyes drove by them in a buggy from the Lima road.

"Who was that, Jack? Did they see me crying?"

"It was Jimmy Bergan's rig."

"It was Samantha Dyer's bonnet," added Irene. "Let us hurry, Jack. I want to send a letter on the five-forty-nine."

Jack took up his lines and with no more words they sped into Pekin.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

XVII

The Squire Plans a Campaign and a Career



HE news that Jack Racer had been admitted to the bar shook Pekin to its centre. It was wholly outside of the probabilities. It was well known that Jack Racer cared only for his pleasures and was incapable of persistence. Yet no one could count reading law a pleasure, and it appeared that he had been "at it" some time. This last fact, indeed, evoked some resentment, for no one had known it, although Jack's comings and goings were matters of common repute.

Punning was not disdained at Pekin, so that there was scarcely a household in which some one had not remarked: "To the bar? Yes, at the Home Circle," alluding to the well-known

saloon in the Palace Block. But as incredulity was forced finally to give way to belief, the news became truly marvellous and excluded all other topics of discussion.

Even Squire George found it difficult to reconcile with his previous knowledge of Jack's character. He was fond of the boy ; for one reason, he was a favorite sister's child. But also because Jack possessed some winning traits that had surely found a way to the legal heart. But he had long since ceased to expect anything serious of his nephew.

Since Jack had told him the evening before, he had thought a good deal about it, and before morning had carried his nephew in his mind through a long and highly prosperous career. This morning he felt so committed to it that he was impatient of delay, and now after breakfast he ascended the light outside stairs to Jack's den, a place he rarely frequented, being averse to stairs and particularly to the frail structure which easily bore Jack's slim figure.

He had not consulted with himself as to how he should introduce Jack to the future he had arranged for him with such affectionate care, and now felt somewhat appalled at the prospect. If Squire George had not been such a large man, and the stairs had not given such warning creaks in his ascent, probably he would have turned and incontinently fled. But this everything rendered impossible, and fortifying himself with fresh courage, he entered the room. "Good!" Jack exclaimed, sweeping off the papers from an easy chair. "Sit down, Uncle. You don't often visit me."

Squire George sat down in the chair.

"Pretty comfortable," he said, looking around him, and adjusting himself. "We don't seem to have anything in the house that fits a man as well as this. Jack, you know how to keep things pretty well cushioned," he said, falling into his old view of his nephew's character.

"Yes, sir. I try to make it as easy for myself as I can."

Squire George cast a glance about the room. It did not appear to be that of a man who burned the midnight oil, except to get him to bed. There were certainly no evidences that even a comparatively serious law student was its inmate. After this scrutiny he picked up a paper and became apparently engrossed in its contents.

Jack left him to his reading and moved around the room, putting away "his things" like a girl. Over the top of the paper his uncle's eyes followed him. Jack was not unconscious of this scrutiny, and partially divined his uncle's state of mind. With some mischief he turned suddenly now and then toward him, when Squire George as suddenly resumed his reading with great zeal. As Jack stopped for a moment to finger over a bowl of late roses, his uncle threw down the paper.

"Jack, your aunt was palavering so at the breakfast table, I did n't say much. I'm free to confess I did n't think it was in you."

Jack turned, leaning on his bureau.

“Thanks, Uncle. I’m trying to think you’ve complimented me, and, true to my instincts, I appropriate it. But frankness for frankness, I was n’t sure of myself.”

“I suppose you have some sort of plans for the future in your head?” the squire ventured, with a timidity comical to the young man, if he had not been touched by it. “Of course, I don’t want to bother you, or hurry you —”

“Yes,” said Jack, dropping into a chair. “But have a cigar, Uncle.” He sprang up and handed a box to choose from, drawing up a table with some luxurious bronze equipments. The squire chose his cigar with care and surveyed Jack’s conveniences with hesitation, then used them with lingering curiosity.

“’Pon my word, Jack, you do make yourself pretty comfortable. Do you get these cigars from Limecooly?”

“Prime, ain’t they? Sam gets them for me at St. Louis.”

The squire leaned back in his chair puffing his cigar leisurely, and Jack pushed a foot-rest under his feet.

"Jack, this is lamentable," the squire suddenly said, after enjoying for a moment his position. "If you go on like this you'll never need a wife. That's bad — bad."

Jack laughed lazily.

"That is n't my view, sir. I'm not such a selfish brute. I'd like to share things."

"O Lord, this is all woman's business," pushing away the stool with his foot, and then recalling it with both feet. "If you take it away from 'em you'll ruin the profession of wives."

"Oh, I see. You take a disinterested view, also."

"Yes, we've got to have an excuse for them, poor things, or how'd they ever get married?"

"Sure enough, Uncle. I see my duty." Jack threw himself on the lounge and retired his face behind a cloud of smoke.

"That's right. Don't shirk your responsibilities. Women are kittle cattle, but they're worth their keep. That recalls me, what did you say your plans were, Jack, for I take it you have n't been digging for nothing?"

"They're not very definite." Jack straightened himself. "But having got a lot of law into me, I suppose the next thing is to find an excuse for getting it out, as luckily as I can. Judge Bowen said if nothing better offered he'd take me in at Sparta."

"A country lawyer has pretty poor pickings. Like as not you'd have to take your fees in apples or potatoes."

"Uncle, you seem to have made a tidy thing out of it."

"Indirectly, yes. Law has one advantage. It affords you a pretty good idea of your neighbor's affairs, and if you combine it judiciously with business you can sometimes turn his misfortunes that are inevitable into your probable good. I've made lucky investments in that

way. But, Jack, you have n't the necessary temperamental hang for that sort of thing."

"I don't believe I have. The only hold the law has over me is a different sort. Now I can conceive of an unholy zeal in proving that black is white, but the recompense of the reward does n't seem to stir me greatly. But," Jack laughed, "I suppose I'd acquire nerve for my bills."

"The worst of it is," said the squire, helping himself to another cigar, "the material we have to work with is so damned uninteresting."

"The crimes are not engaging?" queried Jack.

"And no audience. No, Jack, you'd waste a lifetime. Law is all very well, but make it a stepping-stone. Combine it with something else — politics, for example."

"Politics!" cried Jack, with an accent of disgust.

"Oh, you've got the cut, young man. Don't fly in the face of nature."

“Do I look like a fellow to loaf around the doors of the county offices?”

“That’s a low view of the situation. When you are member for this district, or nominated for governor, you won’t hold the means in such scorn.”

“Oh, I’m to fly high, am I?”

“I have n’t thought of you as a fellow to fly low! But you’ve got to begin somewhere. Take the first thing that offers. The main thing is to get people in the habit of voting for you. They’ll keep it up, whether it’s for governor or coroner. I know a dozen men that are always on the ticket.”

“And you’d like me to be the thirteenth?”
Jack was resting his head on his hands, his elbows on his knees. He lifted his eyes to his uncle’s face.

“I know all you’d say and perhaps I’d agree with you. But if you are the thirteenth, you are also the exception. I don’t fancy you’ll have to go shinning around for what you want.”

"Go on, Uncle. I rather like talking about myself when I'm once at it."

"You see, Jack, things always come easy for you."

"That's encouraging, but I've been thinking differently."

"Yes, they do, particularly things that depend on other people. That's why I want you to go into politics. If it was a question of your own doings, that would be another thing."

"'Pon my word, Uncle! You temper what you have to say pretty well," Jack said, with a comical grin.

"With you, Jack, it's a question of being rather than doing, lucky dog. It's natural for you to fool with babies and palaver women —"

"Oh, if that's all," said the young man.

"It is n't all. I've noticed, too, that you always have a lot of lieutenants. There's Limecooly, Amzi, and that singing fellow, Triplow — I've seen you loafing on corners by the hour —"

“ Oh, Uncle ! ”

“ — and never alone. Jake Durstine’s nag kicks himself out of his harness waiting for you to finish your yarns. Now all that is material which you might as well put to use.”

“ No convictions, nor any of that sort of lumber necessary ? ”

“ They’ll develop in time,” said the squire, carefully knocking off the ashes from his cigar.

“ But don’t hurry. Let ’em ripen. They’re more agreeable when they’re mellow.”

“ Then it’s the business of politics you advise, instead of pressing hay or raising stock.”

“ Precisely, and a business for which you have some natural advantages.”

His uncle paused for a reply, while Jack was tying knots in a string as if that were after all the most important thing. At last he spoke slowly and reluctantly, —

“ You see, Uncle, you put everything in a new light, and I’ve got to accustom my eyes. There

was something more than law in my reading law. A lot of things were mixed up with it."

"Well?" said the squire, impatiently.

"It was a sort of test. If I succeeded in that I might succeed in other things, that is, I might be fit to succeed —"

The squire straightened himself in his chair.

"Jack, I don't understand in the least what you're talking about — succeeding and fit to succeed — for God's sake don't drag sentiment into this business."

Jack colored, but his facile expression readily presented his usual careless face.

"Uncle, you discourage me. I'm not much used to fooling with motives and I confess they interested me."

Squire George shook his head mournfully.

"The long and short of it is, Uncle, having learned my trade, I'd like to follow it. I've a half an idea that if I can keep myself pegging away for a year or so, I might build up a prac-

tice and, who knows, turn out a respectable member of society."

"Of Pekin? You'd die of dry rot."

"I had n't come down to particulars. But why not?"

The squire saw the pleasing fabric he had built during the night falling before his eyes. Jack, a one-horse country lawyer, a little white office, a cannon stove, boxes filled with sawdust, shambling farmers wanting papers drawn up, a little pettifogging over at the Sparta courthouse. The tears almost reached his eyes, for his disappointment was from the heart and very great.

"Jack, listen. I never had a child of my own. When you were a little fellow, if you had been mine I could not have loved you better. I comforted myself for some other things in a good many silly dreams about you in those days."

There was a quavering note in the squire's voice that Jack never remembered to have heard before. "But you did n't show much disposition

to go my way, and you 'll admit, Jack, I never attempted to constrain you."

"And you cared, Uncle?" Jack dropped his string and sprang to his feet.

"Cared, boy?" The squire smiled sadly.

"But a man gets used to seeing his illusions fade. I've reached the point where I say to myself, 'I told you so,' with a mournful laugh. Jack, you were one of my illusions."

Jack paced the room softly to and fro, stopping now and then to gaze vacantly over the Widow Mallon's chimneys opposite.

The squire continued:

"After a while I stopped creeping to your bedside to see if you had been drinking, and went to sleep myself like a baby, leaving the front door unlocked." He gave a perfunctory laugh.

"But last night after you told me of this new —" even now the squire could think of no other word than caprice — "this caprice of yours, the maggot got into my brain again and I had no sleep until morning. By Zux, I thought those old

hopes were all dead, Jack, and here they are alive and kicking." The squire looked wistfully at his nephew.

Jack came from the window and stood before his uncle.

"Why did n't you let me know all this when I was a little fellow — that you cared, I mean?"

There was a suspicious tugging at his throat.

"I always thought Mother's death thrust me under your roof. I used to envy Sam Lime-cooly because his mother whipped him, for she coddled him afterward. I thought whipping and coddling went together. I got neither. Uncle, if you had spanked me I would have known you loved me."

They each gave a precarious laugh and fell into silence, Jack still standing before his uncle with abstracted gaze at his locked hands, and his uncle with his chin on his breast.

At last Jack spoke in a low voice.

"What do you want me to do, Uncle?"

"I don't want to force your inclinations, Jack."

"Never mind that. I'm willing to start out under your flag."

"D'ye mean it?"

Jack nodded.

The squire straightened himself in his chair, his eye alert, his voice assured, and his tender memories gone like a flight of birds.

"Look here, Jack. There are few ins and outs of this business I don't know."

Jack laughed furtively at his uncle's change of demeanor and tone.

"Sam Maginnis is going to give up the justice-ship, to accept a position as deputy under Knowles, if Knowles is elected. Sam need n't wait. He can resign now. You shall be nominated to fill his term which ends in the spring. Meanwhile you've got into traces and have pipes laid for something juicier. Let's see, we will call a primary and force the election at the same time of the state and county ticket."

"But is n't all this rather high-handed?"

"Pooh!" answered the squire.

"But suppose Knowles is n't elected, where's Sam?"

"Fortunes of war."

"But suppose Sam foresees the fortunes of war and won't resign?"

"Knowles will make him. He'll refuse him the appointment if he does n't. Knowles knows he's as strong again if he has my influence, which he'll have if you run. Knowles knows which side of his bread's buttered."

The squire rubbed his hands gleefully.

"Old Martin had his eyes on that squire's office for his shiftless son-in-law. But I haven't forgotten how he euchered me out of that judgment in the Longacre case. Turn about, old man, turn about."

Jack was still thinking of Maginnis.

"How many kids has that man?"

"What man?"

"Sam."

"I never counted them. They can't vote."

"His salary stops, of course, if he resigns."

“Salary!” exclaimed the squire in some disgust. “He has his fees.”

“Same thing, whatever he lives on.”

The squire eyed his nephew with distrust.


“Look here, Jack, don’t make a mistake in the beginning by thinking of the other fellow. In politics it’s Number One.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

XVIII

Pekin Ladies Awake to an Interest in Politics

 JACK had accepted his uncle's proposition in good faith, but he felt as if he had on cap and bells at a masquerade. Notwithstanding, he kept a sober front and endeavored to attune himself to his new part. The offensive white hat was laid aside as unbefitting the season. But the purchase of a slouch hat, the common head-covering of the male inhabitants of that part of the country, instead of a smart Derby, showed Jack's dawning appreciation of the arts of the politician, and that the campaign was to be serious.

Sam Maginnis had promptly resigned, as the squire predicted, although with many inward misgivings. But these were allayed after a private interview with Jack, which had not been

considered by the squire as a necessary feature of Jack's candidacy.

Notices had been printed announcing that "John George Racer offered himself to the citizens of the town of Pekin for the nomination of Justice of the Peace made vacant by the resignation of Samuel Maginnis, Esq." There were a few lines appended in which Mr. Racer stated that his chief aim would be to serve the citizens of Pekin to the best of his ability and to deserve the confidence placed in him by their suffrages, if elected.

The squire suggested some additional lines, and Will Triplow composed some telling sentences over its preparation in Jack's room, but Jack insisted that the Pekin folks would see through any attempt at palaver.

These notices were posted in all public places, and adorned the most venerable trees in the town.

The sensation they created surpassed even that of the Cantata. All day long each notice had

a rapidly dissolving group of people, each hurrying away to carry the news. The campaign for the state and county offices had been languid, but this gave them new zest.

The call for the primary was quite unnecessary, but belonged to the squire's neatly conceived programme. It was no part of his plan that Jack should quietly ride into office through the general elections, but that he should make a gallant fight for it. Opposition was necessary in the first place to throw him into prominence politically, since the justiceship was not an exalted position. It was even more necessary to put the young man himself on his mettle, for the squire well understood the grounds of Jack's complaisance, and that his heart, wherever it might be, was not set on the squire's office.

Squire Martin, he knew, could be depended on for the opposition. Squire Martin was his rival at the bar — the euphemism employed at Peking, where law was less a profession than a busi-

ness, being largely intermingled with advances on hay and grain and the absorption of heavily mortgaged acres.

There was much controversy in Peking as to which was the richer man. The Methodist church held to Squire Martin, who was a prominent member and its financial mainstay. But the other denominations inclined to Squire George, whose check book had fluttered about in times of need. The decision was of no real value, "the richest man in town" being a sort of brevet-rank convenient to use when speaking to strangers, and for that reason highly esteemed in small towns like Peking.

Thus from every point of view it was inevitable that Squire Martin should furnish the opposition. Accordingly another primary was called, and the trees blossomed anew with candidates.

Squire George was a man of too much dignity and discrimination to use the methods of an

ordinary village politician. The subject could not be avoided. That would have been foolish, since Jack was his nephew. Naturally he had his interests at heart. But his procedure was simple and casual.

He had a good deal to say about it, but in an offhand way. This was not a party matter, strictly. Town offices have no business to lie in party lines. There are no national questions involved. It is simply a question of the best man for the place. His nephew Jack, he admitted, had n't distinguished himself as an upholder of law and order. But he had turned over a new leaf, as anybody could see. He had just finished a severe course of study at Sparta, and as for mental equipment, he had the whole digest at his fingers' ends. "What we want now is young blood, the old party hacks are going down hill, played out, sir. When a young fellow of the ability of Jack shows an inclination to go into politics, and to serve his fellow townsmen, by George, he ought

to be encouraged, if he *is* my nephew, *I* say it."

But Squire George's most effective work was of another sort. Meeting Jennings Bierbohm, after a few considerate inquiries after Mrs. Bierbohm and the children, and while Jennings was waiting with cold chills down his spine for the squire to present his bill for defending the weights of his hay-press scales against the charges of a Chicago firm, the squire casually remarked :

"By the way, Jennings, I have n't sent in my bill, for I heard you were a little pressed just now. Have you heard the news ? My nephew Jack's in training for the justiceship ; if you can put in a word for him, it won't be amiss."

And Jennings Bierbohm, becoming warm and enthusiastic in his respite, and with the further chance of the squire's gratitude showing itself in his bill, hurried home and immediately addressed his employees with much more directness and explicitness than the squire employed.

In his legal and business capacity Squire George occupied various relations to different fellow-citizens and these in one way or another were brought into Jack's service.

A more subtle move even was the purchase of a new carved pearl cardcase for his wife in Chicago, which inspired Mrs. George to go out calling, as in Pekin that peculiarly feminine form of paying visits was known. As Mrs. George rarely made visits, when she did it became a personal compliment and was much prized. At this moment she was eagerly welcomed, bringing, as it were, the latest news from headquarters.

No one in Pekin was more earnestly and vivaciously interested in Jack's candidacy than the female "sect," as Miss Dyer called her kind. This was not due alone to the interest that Jack's movements always inspired, but to the fact that the women in small towns of the west have a lively concern in affairs of every sort. They go to political gatherings with the same una-

nimity that they attend camp-meetings. They crusade, as well as take part in tea-drinkings, and have been known to show considerable muscle and directness of aim in knocking in whiskey and beer barrels. They speak in prayer-meeting and exhort at revivals. They are neither afraid nor ashamed to go about town at night ; nor to stand on the corners, if need be, and talk to the men. This freedom of movement only indicates that in the affairs of life, except in such matters as voting, jury duty, and holding office, they are much nearer on planes of equality with men than women similarly situated in the east. To assert that for this reason they are less devoted or less worthy in their purely feminine capacity than women elsewhere, would be a statement that could be made with greater freedom elsewhere. In Pekin it would be bitterly resented by every man in the place.

To Mrs. George had not been confided the secrets of the campaign, but her nearness to the

principal actor seemed to make her in a sense a public character, and her vague and amiable allusions, for the subject was uppermost in every house, were received with flattering interest. After these visits even those ladies of severer turn of mind, who had heard with scorn of Jack Racer as an administrator of peace and justice, were free to confess that he could n't go far wrong with such a polite and well-dressed woman for his aunt.



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CHAPTER NINETEEN



XIX

Jack Racer Wins the Nomination



THE interest in Jack Racer's primary, as it was called in defiance of all the principles of democracy, dwarfed all previous political gatherings. It was announced in consequence that it would be held in the school-house, instead of as usual in Reason Adsit's shoe-shop. Squire Martin had exceeded Squire George's expectations as leader of the opposition. Not only had he arranged for a primary that should nominate his son-in-law, not caring to pit him directly against Squire George's combination, but he had stimulated Dobyns Beesley, a crude young notary, to contest Jack's popularity at his own primary, a piece of rashness the youth would never have ventured on unsupported.

Dobyns Beesley's candidacy had in turn suggested to Abner Goby, an elderly man, that his chance might lie between the two youths. All this was more inspiring than the squire could have hoped. Primaries were usually attended in Pekin by seven or eight men who arranged things amicably as agreed. But this evening the available friends of each man were present, and the school-house was crowded. The women had scurried through their dishes and were grouped about the streets, or pacing up and down bonnetless in the moonlight and mild air. A fringe of small boys hung about the door, or pressed their noses and cheeks against the school-house windows. The town was alive with the excitement. Even the Martin men hung about with curious air, backed up against fences and trees, hands in their pockets, discussing the probabilities.

Inside, Will Triplow, Sam Limecooly, and Amzi were promptly on hand, and Jake Durstine, shaved and in his Sunday coat.

"It ought to be against etiquette for a man to come to his own funeral," said Jack, "easy and impident," as was his wont.

There was a stir on his entrance. Men nudged one another and poked fingers in their neighbors' sides. Then a moment of suspense. Whatever young Mr. Racer may have felt of unworthiness or embarrassment at being the cause of this assemblage of citizens it did not appear. He still wore his conquering hero air, and it sent a sickening thrill through Dobyns Beesley, who now execrated himself at having pitted his less showy person against a young man to whom, as his uncle and Miss Burke truthfully said, "things seemed to come easy."

Jack sat down, not wisely, his uncle thought, by Jake Durstine, and they fell to telling stories, laughing immoderately, as if graver matters were not imminent. Even Sam and Amzi, who were prepared to stand by Jack to the last, felt something of the gravity of the occasion, while Will Triplow was already popping up and down

among the audience, putting in, as he said, a word in season.

But Jack's accustomed and light-hearted demeanor served him quite as well. Only the invincible, it appeared, could be so indifferent. "I suppose it's the polite thing to shake hands with my opponents," said Jack, rising. "I've never been here before, but that's what Sullivan did before he thrashed Tug Wilson at St. Louis."

Jack shook himself and went with easy grace across the room.

Dobyns's unwarranted aspirations had seemed to Jack's friends the sort of insolence that needed rebuke. It would have been quite within the understanding of the rank and file if Jack had refused to speak to Dobyns. In Pekin the sight of opposing lawyers hobnobbing after court hours at Sparta had always been a scandal and a reflection on the morals of Sparta; for if, in the revision of the Scriptures prepared for the American public, a Democrat or Republican

could have been substituted for the rich man, in Pekin it would have thrown a flood of light on the passage of the camel through the eye of the needle, so strong was party feeling.

This explains the momentary paralysis of every one in the room, as Jack advanced in friendly fashion and took Dobyns's hand.

As for Dobyns himself, when Jack's cheerful "Hillo, Dob!" met his ear, he would have felt more at ease if Jack had taken him by the collar and propelled him with the toe of a polished boot to the door.

But the amenities of politics thus introduced were not fruitless.

If Dobyns had consulted his feelings he would have delivered himself over to Jack then and there, but he was aware that the occasion merited some dignity. Instead, he straightened himself and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Racer, we are not enemies, I hope."

"Bless your heart, no. I expect you to vote for me."

Dobyns smiled faintly, still feeling that nothing but a sense of duty could induce him to prolong the situation.

“Of course, we’ll go through this preliminary fuss and feathers — balloting, you and I. But — Dob, who persuaded you to throw yourself into the breach like this?”

“Well, upwards of several people spoke to me. I’ve been qualifying myself with Squire Martin and he thought it a good time —”

“You know he means to run his son-in-law. However, I am very much obliged to him for selecting to oppose me here a gentleman for whom I have as much esteem as yourself, and whichever way the tide turns we remain good friends?” Jack smiled graciously and extended his hand again.

A trained politician could not have accomplished more thoroughly Dobyns’s demoralization. He clutched Jack’s hand.

“Jack, help me out of this,” he said in a hoarse and agonized whisper. “I don’t want to run.

If anybody puts me up, I'll holler. 'Tell me what to do.'

"Dob, that 's scarcely my business. Consult your friends, and then do as you please. That is the best way to take advice. It 's a compliment to me, you know, for you to run."

Reasoning of this sort was out of Dobyns's comprehension. Feeling more abject than ever, he went hastily in search of some friendly adviser on whom he could cast himself, and the young politician passed on.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Goby?" cried Jack, with pleased surprise. He stopped before a group of men in their shirtsleeves, with gray, stubbly chins, to one of whom he held out his hand.

"I feel that I ought to apologize to your gray hairs," pleased with his own sense of humor.

"The atrocious crime of being a young man, you know," he added, with vague reminiscence.

"That'll mend, as we was a-sayin', but, Jack, you ain't got the experience for the squire's office."

"Experience, my dear sir, is two-edged," said

Jack, resting his foot on the desk bench and letting one arm hang idly over his knee, an attitude that impressed the boys pressing their faces against the window-panes, and also the Pekin youth, for whom legs and arms were still appendages and often in the way.

"Now here's Mr. Goby who never broke anything in his life but colts, and here I am, who have been shaving the law ever since I was knee-high. Why, I know every legal clapboard of the squire's office, and every knothole, too," Jack grinned.

The men broke into loud laughter.

"Set a thief to catch a thief, eh, Jack?"

"That's about the size of it," answered Jack good-humoredly, amid loud guffaws. "You know yourself, Squills, you would n't trust your best razor to a man who did n't know how easy it was to ruin it."

The laugh was transferred to Squills who had n't shaved since the sixties, bound by some political vow.

"Here 's Mr. Goby," continued Jack, "the best-natured man alive. How can you expect him to deal with cases of 'provoke'? Now I—" Jack felt his smooth chin with a thoughtful air. The men roared again.

"There 's nothin' of the hy-pocrite about Jack," one whispered, and another :

"With all his vain, idle ways, Jack never was stuck-up."

"Mr. Racer!" A young man approached Jack with a conscious air of importance, and a husky voice.

"Mr. Beesley desired me to present you with this."

Jack opened a folded paper and glanced within.

"My good fellow, I can't take charge of this. It 's all out of order. You must give it to the chair. Where is Mr. Beesley?"

"Gone home, sir, to bed. He says nobody need n't come after him, for he 'll be asleep and would n't wish to be disturbed."

Jack turned with ready formality.

"Will you convey to Mr. Beesley my regrets that he sees fit to withdraw ; and also my thanks for the cordial support he offers. You'd better lay the paper on the table, Bud," as he took Mr. Beesley's formal withdrawal and tender of support from Mr. Goby, demoralized in turn by its contents.

"That floors me, Jack," he whispered. "I meant to come in a-tween you."

"Brace up, Goby. Brace up," said Jack, absently. "I don't want to support the honor of this contest alone."

"I'd jes' as leave you'd have it as me, Jack. I don't know but I'd leaver."

The chair rapped for order, and Jack went back to his seat by Jake Durstine.

During the final confusion Abner Goby scrambled out of his seat between the desks and hurried over to Sam Limecooly. Wedging himself in between Sam and Will, he wound one arm affectionately around Sam's neck, and lifted his mouth to Sam's ear.

“Who ’s goin’ to give in Jack’s name, Sam?”

“They ’ve put that on me. What’s up, Goby?”

“Lemme, Sam. Jack’s such a friendly cuss, an’ since Dob Beesley’s moseyed, I ain’t no chance. Ye see, I’d like to do the p’lite thing now by Jack.”

Thus the amenities of the campaign prospered. The pretence of business fell flat. The reading of Dobyns Beesley’s withdrawal was already an old story.

The sensation arrived when Abner Goby, who had not sat down again in his eagerness to do the “han’some thing,” announced that he would like to present the name of a gentleman well known in this ’ere community for the nomination of Justice of the Peace,—Mr. Jack Racer, Esquire.

It was a great moment. Everybody appreciated the courtesy of the occasion. Before Abner, with a wave of the hand and a scrape of the foot, could sit down, before Sam could get up and support Abner’s nomination, a great

shout went up, echoed by all the boys outside. Jack's eyes grew moist. He had been confident enough, but he was not prepared for this. He turned to Jake Durstine, who was beating him with affectionate vigor on the back.

"I could have cheeked it through, Jake, but this —" Jack could say no more.

The squire hurried to him, striving to appear merely dignified and benevolent.

"Bravo, Jack. Done without striking a blow. You can give me points, boy. Jake, don't you believe this youngster can walk alone?" turning to Jake with the familiarity he had discouraged in Jack.

The crowd trooped out in high humor, men wringing Jack's hand as they passed.

Jack felt very humble, for a rising young politician. He wanted to get away from it all. Sam and Will Triplow waited until he could disengage himself. The janitor was turning down the lights when the three young men went out into the street.

A group of girls under a tree challenged them as they passed.

"Congratulations, Jack!"

"You don't know what a comfort it is to know I've a friend at court," chimed in Anna Ross.

"Jack, I hope you'll bind Sam Limecooly over to keep the peace. Sam, you tease!" And she gave him a push off the plank sidewalk.

"Jack, I'm so glad you're goin' to be squire. I'm dying to sass Samantha Dyer, an' she'll have me up for provoke. But you'll let me off easy, won't you?"

"I'll go your bail myself, Alice."

Then Aunt Kiz appeared, bareheaded, and with her arm about her niece.

"Stop a minit, Aunt Kiz, and we'll introduce you to the new squire," Anna cried.

"Can't; I'm afraid of the neuraligy."

Jack caught a glimpse of a fair young face in the moonlight as Aunt Kiz hurried by, throwing a mocking voice over her shoulder:

"Girls, there'll be no more skylarkin' even-

in's, no more night-prowlin's. New brooms sweep clean. I'm goin' to begin layin' by fines in a stockin' leg."

Jack felt a sudden imperative need for sympathy, for the sound of a soft voice, a gentle touch, instead of all this gay, mocking friendliness. He turned helplessly to Anna.

"Anna, if you are going home I'll walk with you. Will, you and Sam go to my room, and I'll meet you there directly."

It had been a long time since Anna had strolled in the moonlight with Jack. In her elation, as she took his arm she felt a new sense of embarrassment. Jack was silent, and she could think of nothing to say. Suddenly, with that utter lack of discernment which often trips women acute by nature, she thought of a topic.

"Jack!"

"Yes," taking his eyes down from the moon.

"When is Rene coming back?"

Yes, he was on the earth once more. He did not answer for a moment.

"Back? Where has she gone?" with sudden recollection.

"Did n't you know it?" Anna leaned forward doubtfully to look him in the face.

"You know I've been busy with these affairs," he mumbled.

"She's been gone a week. Mrs. Maule told me to-night."

"Where has she gone?" with faint interest.

"Home, — Peru. She went very suddenly. I think it's awful queer she did n't let a body know. Don't you?"

"I suppose. But women have their own ways."

"Well, it is n't her way. You know that. She usually holds a levee at the cars and you're master of ceremonies, Jack Racer."

Jack laughed aloud, not at Anna's wit, but at his own futile cravings. Truly, Anna had not the sovereign gift.

Jack bade her good night and wandered down the Sparta road to soothe his restless spirit. The night was balmy and the moon rode high among

the clouds. The spicy odors from the burning brush, from the twigs of currant, the branches of peach and plum, the broken bits of sweet-briar and rose of Sharon gathered from the paths by careful housewives, stirred his senses. He felt a sense of exaltation that was not born out of the lighted schoolroom and the shouts of the men. Memories sprang into life, a crowd of recollections pressed upon him, of his childhood, his mother. He felt once more a boy's hope, courage, faith. He walked rapidly on with a boy's blithe step, until he came to the cross roads. Here, Fancy, the buggy, Irene, passed before him like an eclipse. He uttered an oath, and turned on his heel, his face no longer uplifted to the moon.

How long he walked and where, he did not know.

But while he walked Will Triplow and Sam waited patiently in his room, accustomed to Jack's vagrant ways.

"He's probably supporting Ross's gatepost,"

said Sam, making himself comfortable on the lounge.

Will Triplow had already planned a Campaign Glee Club, and now took out a pencil and a sheet of Jack's legal cap over which he busied himself, speaking only at intervals.

"How is this, Sam?"

"Oh, Pekin 's the gem of the prairie,
The home of the brave and the free."

"Good, Will. Go it," answered Sam, sleepily, but with appreciation.

"Sam, what rhymes with prairie?"

"Mary, Sary, dairy, fairy."

"Fairy; let me see, — fairy, fairy. No, you can't make it come in." Will scribbled again in silence.

"How is this, Sam? —

"Jack Racer its standard will carry
In triumph from mountain to sea."

"Couldn't be beat," said Sam, with his eyes shut. Will returned to his labors with enthusiasm, and

Sam slept the sleep of neither politician nor poet.

At length Jack stopped, foot-sore and weary, and sat down on a doorstep with his head on his hands.

“Oh, I wish I had a mother,” he groaned. “Here I am creeping like a beggar through the town, hungering and thirsting like any other unfortunate devil.”

He lifted his head. Before him were a row of familiar locust trees, one a huge, lofty-bodied tree with a well-remembered shelf-shaped knot. The moon was low and half hidden. He sprang up and looked about him. He was in front at the Campbells’ house. He threw up his head and laughed gleefully.

“By Jupiter, I ’ll have it, I ’ll have it.” The weariness of his spirit left him. The shouts of the men echoed joyfully once more. He felt the strong flow of manhood in his veins — of achievement, of happiness. “Why not,” he said, with upward glance at the silent win-

dows, "why not for me? What should there be on earth that I want, and I not have it?"

He clung, like a drunken man, to the tree, his head pillowed serenely on the rough-barked knot, drunk indeed with his new hopes.

Footsteps sounded up the street. He moved further into the shadow. A man passed, looking suspiciously about him.

"This won't do," he said, as the man turned the corner. "My constituents expect me to be in bed betimes." And he sighed, realizing that the fine edge of his freedom was already gone.



CHAPTER TWENTY

XX

But the Barbecue Makes Him Happier Still



NOWLES, the candidate for sheriff, as Squire George predicted was glad to avail himself of the George influence. Having performed his part of the agreement in impressing Mr. Maginnis with the prudence that lay in prompt resignation, Knowles in turn claimed the squire's aid in the northern part of the county, where his own merits were not so well understood. From here it was decided there would be more extended raids in behalf of the state ticket, and in view of succeeding campaigns.

Work of this sort Squire George felt to be just the preliminary training Jack needed. He was also glad to put him in the hands of a practical

politician like Knowles, who was one of the men the squire alluded to as being always on the ticket, and no dashed nonsense about him. Jack himself, in his new-born zeal, was not averse. He was prepared to go into the campaign with animation. Notwithstanding his efforts to take the situation seriously, its novelty amused him. For one thing, he was not only as usual the centre of attention, but he found himself approved. He seemed to have a new group of virtues and, at least until his opponents got under way, his detrimental features appeared to be effaced or forgotten. Campaigning, moreover, was something of a lark. Different, of course, from his usual round of neighboring races, yet in many features the same.

There were ten days until the election. These were passed in the company of men who spent money freely, stopped at the best hotels, and dined with the local magnates. When they joined the men on the state ticket, there were receptions after the evening speeches, and Jack

found himself, as always, among the prettiest girls and most vivacious women.

"If it was left to the women," said the governor good-naturedly, "Racer would sweep the state."

"Yes," said Knowles, "he worked his passage cross country carrying water and wood for the wimmen. Blamed ef I did n't see him once at a woodpile."

But Jack had also his share of the burden of the day. His maiden speeches were neither models of profundity nor of eloquence. But his ready tongue, infinite tact, and sense of humor served him quite as well. The listeners often yawned under the governor's ponderous arguments, and were too accustomed to Knowles's picturesque vituperation and broad stories to appreciate their artistic character. But Jack's brisk sallies, piquant comment, light touch, and unfailing courtesy of speech combined into a species of oratory new to the prairie, and softened the asperities of the campaign.

But some credit must be placed to his slim figure and well-fitting clothes, to the disposal of his legs and the use of his arms, all of which appeared so knowing that from them might justly be argued the possession of certain inalienable truths.

To Jack himself, although freely spoken of and described in the local papers as a rising young politician, all this was merely "trying it on the dog." As has been intimated, he was not a young gentleman to go out of his way for an illustration.

Squire George's practised hand had arranged that the final rally of the campaign was to take place at Pekin. This was to consist of a barbecue, which would require the united forces of the state and county tickets. Pekin, as the smallest town in the county, had no right to this honor in the teeth of Sparta, Lima, and Rome city. But after much growling and sarcastic comment, public and private, as the roads were fine and Indian summer had begun to

hover in all its loveliness over the prairie, the county acquiesced, and local pride yielded to personal pleasure. To the occasion the squire sacrificed one of his finest cattle. According to traditional rites, the great ox had been roasting since early morning on a burning bed of crab-apple boughs, where it was attended by a devoted band of men and boys.

The barbecue was to take place in a grove of buckeyes at the edge of town. The speakers' stand was made of rough planks, raised and fenced in. But the Stars and Stripes hid their ugliness and made a flamboyant background draped from the low branches of the overhanging trees. In front and on every side were low plank seats precariously raised on blocks from Jones's mill. In the vernacular, these seats were inclined "to teeter," but no disaster could be dangerous since they were scarcely a foot from the soft, dry prairie sward. On one side was a space reserved for the Sparta band, which of itself would have dignified any occasion.

On the other side were the seats for Will Trip-low's Glee Club, young men and maids wearing blue badges.

Squire George, although his skill had managed all the details of these scenes in which his nephew played so prominent a part, kept himself as discreetly as possible in the background. The dearest wish of his heart was that honors should heap high on Jack. Jack, he knew, needed only opportunity. This he took care he should have.

To-day the hospitality of his house claimed the prominent speakers, chief of whom was the governor. Carriages, carts, wagons, filled with people, came from the Sparta and Lima roads past the house. The street was a continual procession of foot-passengers on their way to the barbecue. Groups of Pekin idlers hung about the gate, and observed the distinguished guests through the doors and windows, and among them Jack, "chipper with the governor as with me," said Jake Durstine, with pride

equally distributed between Jack and himself. The squire reserved his carriage for Mrs. George's use, and sent to Sparta for the barouche. This was an imposing affair with a great deal of nickel plating. It was never out except on special occasions, such as funerals and weddings. In fact, it had been bought with a view to those bridal couples who in such busy seasons as haying and harvest could only snatch moments, as it were, for marrying, and rode round town, in the barouche, a wedding tour much in vogue. With the top thrown back and a driver on the box, in a country where every man and every woman drove, it was altogether unique.

As it drove up now before the George gate, the crowd pressed closer. Jack came down the walk with the governor and the two members of the state ticket, and handed them in.

"Jack, I'm goin' to vote for you," cried a small boy. As Jack sprang into the empty seat a shout went up, "Hurrah for Racer!" and Beezy

Lemmons, the driver, cracking his whip, the barouche moved off in fine style.

As they drove along, the girls waved their handkerchiefs to the young man on the front seat, and here and there a voice cried out, "Hurrah for Racer!"

"You seem to be pretty strong here, Mr. Racer," said the governor.

"They've lately taken to it, sir. They'll have to do pretty well to make up for lost time."

The advent of the barouche created the sensation the squire had planned. Jack jumped out, and led the gentlemen to the speakers' stand, where the committee awaited them, resplendent in large rosettes of ribbon. The Sparta band struck up "Hail to the Chief," a compliment intended for the governor, for Sparta could not be expected to champion Jack Racer as did Pekin.

There was a rush for the ice-cream and peanut stands. The squire's ox, on which the crowd had been feasting, was forsaken. The car-

riages and wagons pressed closer. Men, women, and children strove for the front seats. Political wisdom and prairie oratory appeared to be the two things most to be desired. The condescending periods of the candidate for auditor were listened to with flattering attention. At length the novelty wore off. The restless children climbed over knees and stumbled over feet, to get back to candy and lemonade. The young boys and girls slipped away to sit together under remote trees.

Then the auditor wiped his brow and sat down, and the band played again.

The governor stood up, amid lusty cheers. Men left yellow spaces of plank to press nearer the speakers' stand, where they listened attentively to his heavy-weighted oratory. But the outside crowd grew apace. The women fell to gossiping. The babies slid down from their mothers' laps and supported their toddling ventures by holding on to the empty seats, or crept underneath on exploring tours among strange

ankles. Now and then some startled foot discovered them, and dragged forth by strange hands, surrounded by strange faces, they set up loud shrieks, in which various mothers heard familiar notes and rushed to the rescue.

Then the governor wiped his brow and sat down, amid loud applause, and the band played again. When the last note had shrunk into silence, the chairman rose and presented to his fellow-townsmen "a gentleman whom you know, Mr. Racer." There was a wild shout. The children scampered back pellmell over the seats. The girls and boys under the trees ceased their cooing, and ran with the children. The women snapped the thread of talk. The empty patches of yellow plank disappeared under the kaleidoscopic colors of the prairie finery. For a few moments the whole mass was in movement. There was a general and flattering interval of readjustment — what the children call "getting a good ready." Meanwhile Jack, on his feet, waited.

The governor leaned back and whispered to the auditor :

“It looks like the machinery of the state had only been put in motion to make this young man a squire.”

“It isn’t the first case I’ve seen, Governor, of the tail wagging the dog,” laughed Mullinex. And Jack! Never had the situation so closely touched him. Beneath all this restless curiosity, he felt the friendly interest, the throb of local pride. His old self-sufficiency did not seem adequate support. He welcomed this response. They were his friends after all.

He looked down upon the upturned faces. Billy Campbell stood directly beneath him, his hands in his pockets and head almost resting on his back. At one side was Squire George, leaning forward in his carriage; on the other, Will Triplow, proud and important, at the head of his singing legion. A few seats away sat Jake Durstine, his face aglow and both hands behind his ears. And back, skirting the crowd,

Aunt Kiz with Lucy under her fierce and protecting wing. He recognized them one by one, and his eyes grew moist.

At last the great throng settled; the rustling ceased. It could scarcely be expected that more fastidious communities would have been equally interested in young Mr. Racer's speech. Its seductive humor and courteous tone struck a new note at Pekin. But Jack was stirred with a new impulse. His heart spoke, touched by a strange warmth. And Pekin, that Pekin he had so consistently snubbed during his checkered career, listened with wondering surprise and hearts touched in return.

When Jack sat down, the grove rang and rang again. The hard-faced and unshaven men shook hands with one another. Women laughed and cried, and Will Triplow's "Glee Club" broke into the triumphant strain he had polished and rehearsed with such care.

More clearly than ever the governor and his companions realized that they were but train-

bearers, as it were, to this young man; but they shook him cordially by the hand. The squire pressed forward, but had no words. Jack knew his uncle's vigils were more than repaid.

As he came down the steps men gathered about him, and Jake Durstine, on tiptoe, shouted over Sam's shoulder :

"Jack, you've growed two inches since I saw you last."

Jack made his way through the crowd, which gave way before him with a deference due his new distinction, and a train of small boys filled up the gap. The Pekin girls all twisted their heads to speak to him as they passed, and the Sparta girls looked on to envy and admire. But Jack did not stop.

Because he had set himself to his law books; and from the standpoint of that early determination which he had expressed with some stammering to his uncle when his present political enterprise was proposed, he felt that he

had now earned the right to give way to his own inclinations.

Yet it was with some modest misgivings and a still humble sense of unworthiness that he pressed forward to the seats where Aunt Kiz sat with Lucy at her side. His heart yet glowed with its late emotion and newly-kindled friendliness for Pekin, but he could not rest until it assumed more personal form.

He paused for a moment in the crowd which quickly gathered about him, to watch the two. Aunt Kiz was listening, while Lucy talked rapidly with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. "How happy she looks," Jack thought. "If I could keep her so, I'd turn on my heel and go to Kamtschatka. But why not happy for me?" The question he had asked himself so often of late came back. He threw up his head and plunged through the crowd again, until he stood with folded hands like a school-boy before them.

Lucy ceased her chatter and looked up with a proud smile.

"I believe it is for me," Jack thought, but did not speak.

"Makin' believe you love us an' pretty near persuadin' us," said Aunt Kiz.

"I've been at your feet ever since I can remember."

"Oh, I have n't any vote," with a toss of her head.

"But don't prejudice Billy, I'm a young man with aforethought."

"Well, now you've got Pekin at last under them shiny boots, be good to it."

"If you could only see the goodness stored up in me, spoiling for an occasion."

"Are we an occasion, Lucy, that we're gettin' so much of the young man's notice?"

Lucy laid her hand on her aunt's arm involuntarily. This accustomed badinage did not seem fitted to Jack's new mood.

He still stood before them with unwonted humility and gentle deference.

"I'm sure I'd like to bask in his presence longer," continued the willful old woman, "but Sam Campbell wants his supper. Come, Lucy."

Jack turned to Lucy.

"Have n't you a word for me, Lucy?" he asked, in gentle reproach.

"Words!" said Aunt Kiz. "She has talked me stun deaf."

Lucy put out her hand. A restless child jumped from its seat and Jack sat down by her side.

"You are the only one who has n't given me a word," he said again in a low voice.

"Oh, Jack, you have made us so happy. Aunt Kiz, for all her saucy talk, cried when you were talking."

"But you — you?"

"Ah, I was only glad I knew that that was really you," she answered softly.

"You had that much faith in me?"

She nodded.

"That makes me very happy," he said, his shining eyes bent upon the ground.

But among the rear seats was commotion.

"Mrs. Maule! Where is Mrs. Maule? Here is a telegraph fellow huntin' you, Mrs. Maule."

Mrs. Maule was seated with Mrs. Stivers, who had found the society of Pekin congenial, and whose husband had been perfectly willing to find a substitute for her duties toward the Cantata.

Mrs. Maule, who had never received a telegram in her life before, was much flustered. She now held it at arms' length like an explosive, and surveyed it with her head thrown back, while sympathizing friends drew near.

"You 'd better open it and break it to her," suggested one.

But Mrs. Maule held on to the straw-colored envelope. Trembling and nervous as she was, she determined to make the most of it.

Feeling in her dress for a pin, and finally dis-

lodging one from the rear of her collar, she inserted it in the envelope.

"That is n't the way they do it nowadays," explained an eager and more experienced friend. "They just rip away at the ends."

But Mrs. Maule felt the proper way would be to get into the envelope the way the telegraph company got into it, and with her pin carefully ploughed the path of the mucilage while the surrounding company watched her breathlessly. Slowly she unfolded the yellow slip. The speaker who was now giving potent reasons why his term of office should be prolonged was not attracting more attention.

"Why, she's gone," exclaimed a more ready scholar in the group, peering over her shoulder while Mrs. Maule was cautiously threading her way among the words.

"Who's gone?"

"Rene Burke. She's been gone these two week."

Mrs. Maule turned, with a sense of injury.

She herself had not yet made out the contents of her telegram, and there seemed to be something almost indecent in forestalling her, and her name written on the back of it. However, it assisted her somewhat, and she was shortly after able to read it aloud in careful, distinct tones.

“ ‘Don’t frighten Irene Burke,’ Massy me! who’s a-scarin’ her? She never was scared of me.” Mrs. Maule stopped reading to make solemn asseveration. “She carried on as she’d a mind to!”

“Go on, Mrs. Maule,” exclaimed an impatient listener. “There’s more.”

“ ‘Don’t frighten Irene Burke! Her mother sick. Come home.’ Sich shiftless way of writin’! Who’s come home? I’m goin’ right down to that derspatch office an’ sass that boy for not puttin’ the words in, an’ he paid to do it, too. Who’s come home?”

“Sho’, now, Mrs. Maule. That’s always the way they do it. You’ve got to put in the lit-

tle words yourself. 'They can't be foolin' with the wires for the 'if's' an' 'an's.' It's trouble enough gittin' the big words along."

"But Rene has gone home, has n't she, Mrs. Maule?"

"Two weeks ago, and suddent enough."

"That's mighty funny."

"Funny! My room empty a whole week till little Mis' Stivers come? Funny, that ain't my word for it!"

"But she is n't home. Her mother is sick an' they want her to come home. 'Don't frighten' means break it to her easy."

"How do you make all that out?" Mrs. Maule puzzled again over her telegram, and before it was clear to her mind the word had gone abroad.

"What are ye goin' to do about it, Mrs. Maule? You've got to despatch 'em back," said the friend who had undertaken to pilot Mrs. Maule through these troubled waters.

"Shucks! Rene's got home by this time."

"This beats all. How long, Mrs. Maule,

d' ye suppose that despatch has been com-
in' ? ”

“ But Rene went two weeks ago,” persisted the
perplexed Mrs. Maule.

“ Mrs Maule, them words was histed on to the
wires this day.”

“ Massy me ! Where is she ? ”

“ That 's the question.”

Aunt Kiz sat silent and uneasy. At last she
caught sight of a sunburned head peering up
from among the planks. It was Billy, prone
on the ground, making his way under the seats,
and lifting his head now and then to get his
bearings.

“ Billy,” she called, feeling that his presence
would, as always, bring some change of position
or conversation.

Billy wriggled himself out from among the
boards. Seeing Jack, he bounded on top of
the planks, jumping from one to the other.
The planks bounded in turn, and the dis-
turbed audience turned angrily, but ineffec-

tually, toward Billy, who presented to them only a lively back and a pair of sturdy legs. His eyes were fixed on Jack.

“Jack,” he said, breathlessly, “Jack, I heard every word you said. I was lookin’ right straight up at you, and your chin went this way,” taking his own chin in his fingers and applying it to violent exercise. “Let me sit ’tween you an’ Lucy.”

“There isn’t room. Billy, I thought you were listening to me.”

“Well, I could n’t always understand you. You said them big words to show off before that big, fat man, did n’t you?”

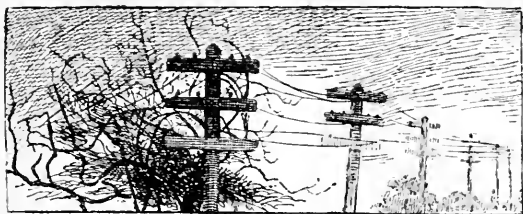
Billy was now trying to wedge himself in between Jack and Lucy.

“It’s a good thing you’re grown up, Jack,” he continued, “for if the boys call you smarty or proudy, you can lick ’em.”

“That I can, easily.” Jack lifted Billy up summarily and sat him down on the opposite plank.

“ Lucy ’d ruther have me next her. Would n’t you, Lucy ? ”

“ I don’t doubt, youngster. But to-day is my day,” said the young man in a low voice, but exultant.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

XXI

It is Again Evidenced that Pride Goes Before
a Fall



THE next day was Sunday. The excitement of the barbecue was almost effaced by the later news of Irene Burke's disappearance. The practised and nimble mind of a little country town disposes of circumstances and manufactures facts with a neatness and skill of which larger places with events occupying a wider area can have no idea. Already the details of Miss Burke's disappearance, its cause and its object, presented a coherent and exciting story.

Of this nothing was known at the George residence. The governor had stayed one night. The squire's carefully arranged programme included morning service at the Presbyterian church. To

this Jack would cheerfully go in attendance on the governor. To have sent Jack alone would have been too flagrant an electioneering manœuvre, even if Jack had been amenable, as the squire was very sure he would not be, Jack not being a church-going young man, differing in this respect, as in others, from the Pekin youth. The report that the governor would attend church would not only insure the full attendance of Presbyterians, but of that mobile church-going element which in every place has a keen scent for ecclesiastical attractions not in the strict line of piety or dogma.

The governor carrying Mrs. George's hymn-book, and Mrs. George in her best Chicago toilet, did not fail to create an impression as they moved up the aisle. Jack preceded them, and did the honors with his usual freedom from embarrassment. To a large part of the audience — the women — Mrs. George did seem truly an enviable person as the two distinguished gentlemen stepped aside that she might enter her pew.

While the governor received momentary consideration, lasting while he adjusted his eyeglasses and politely found the hymn for Mrs. George, Jack was the object of curious eyes. He leaned back in the pew, apparently unconscious of attention, as became the young duke of Pekin. A slight smile lingered on his face, which was not born of the sermon. This was indeed grave, and its note of warning, its hints of the trials and temptations to which youth is exposed, ought to have caught the ear of a thoughtful and earnest young man.

Although his attitude was one of flattering attention to the preacher, Jack sat there, lost, drunken, in an enchanted island of his own hopes and dreams. Occasionally his eyes wandered; and his smile broadened as Billy Campbell, peacefully dozing in one of the side seats, kicked the little wooden footstool with a loud noise. "I dreamed I was on a fence and the board broke," he said, audibly and in self-defence. After church, contrary to the customs of Pekin,

Jack accompanied Mrs. George and the governor directly home. It was never Mrs. George's inclination to stop, and Jack felt it scarcely due the governor to separate himself from the church party.

The crowd lingering about the church door was even larger than usual, and the hum of conversation louder. The "Gossip Exchange," as Jack himself called it, was confined to one absorbing topic, Irene Burke and her mysterious disappearance, for it appeared Mrs. Maule had, with much persuasion and wear and tear of mind, answered her telegram, and further advices had made it plain that Irene's family knew nothing of her movements.

Mrs. Maule was thrust into sudden prominence by her connection with the event. Heretofore she had been a rusty widow on the outskirts of every group. Now she was the centre. She enjoyed her position, although not quite at home in it. She had told the story of Irene's going in every possible light, and had answered every

conceivable question. But, like most unimportant people, she could not discriminate between her own accidental connection with them and the dramatic events which she was called upon to relate.

This was felt even in Pekin, where artistic and dramatic narrative has never been a matter of consideration, and some impatience was ungratefully felt at Mrs. Maule's manner.

"Jack Racer druv her home, an' she was scarcely indoor, when she called me an' dove for her clothes. Quicker 'n you could shake a stick, she had every whipstitch in, rollin' up her dresses so fashion, puttin' in white an' colored, as may be. It certainly was a sin an' shame. Hurry's worry, say I."

"But what did she say, Mrs. Maule?"

"'I'm a goin' away,' says she, 'Mrs. Maule. It's very suddent. But I must be off this very night!'"

"Did n't she tell you why?"

"There was no satisfaction to get anything out

of her, she was a dashin' away in an' out, with her hairbrush in her hand."

"Did n't you ast her pintedly ? "

"I knew it was nothin' agin me, nor the room. Goodness knows, I'd given her the best I had as I do this minit to little Mis' Stivers, so I ain't lost much by Rene playin' off that way."

"Did Jack Racer come back for her ? "

"No, she said she'd go to the depot and send a push cart for her trunk."

"I made brother Bill go down and ask the ticket-man where to she'd bought her ticket, but he'd gone to Lima that day an' his cousin peddled out the tickets for him," contributed one of the group.

"It would n't be past my guessin'," added another, "if 't was only make believe, an' Rene was in Pekin this blessed day."

"Where, where?" exclaimed the eager listeners.

"I'm a thinkin' she knows sumpin. Oh, tell us, Mandy ! "

"There 's places an' places," said the speaker,

nodding her head and shutting her thin lips tightly, as if the secret might escape.

“An’ that’s a purty tale,” said Mrs. Maule indignantly. “Rene had no call to leave me. The table stood an’ waited for her many’s the time, while she was collogin’ at the gate, an’ I never opened my head, an’ never once did she offer to help wash the dishes —”

Mrs. Maule’s indignation was cut short by the appearance of the Methodist congregation. This was the signal for a rearrangement of the groups. Miss Samantha Dyer was one of the last persons to see Miss Burke, as we know, on the occasion of her return from Sparta with Jack Racer behind Fancy. Those who had listened with patient interest to Mrs. Maule, now gathered about Miss Dyer, and the Methodist sisters circled about Mrs. Maule. Still the mystery of Irene’s disappearance did not seem as inexplicable to Mrs. Maule as the way she packed her trunk. To her going away in the cars was a matter of deliberation, and the packing of a trunk

a ceremony that began a week before the appointed time for setting forth, by putting aside the spare room for the collection of wearing apparel and the devotion of spare moments to experimenting on their proper adjustment in the trunk. It was impossible to get into the heart of the matter without entering into this subject and Mrs. Maule was now launched.

Miss Dyer's story was much more meaty and satisfying.

"Leastwise, that 'sall I know," said Miss Dyer, modestly deprecating that she had not fuller advices, when her audience was on tiptoe all about her, after a free recital of all she had observed from the Lima road.

"An' that 's the end of it. Rene Burke was a cryin' away with her head on Jack Racer's shoulder."

"Jack Racer!" exclaimed the crowd, with the precision of a stage chorus.

"Him, an' none other. I said, 'Jimmy, looky.' But he 's so mortal unsuspectin', he turned the

wrong way, an' only got their backs which was straightforad enough. But he knew Jack's rig."

A momentary silence fell on the listeners. At length a hesitating voice spoke :

"A body might know Jack Racer's at the bot-
tom of it." That was conclusive.

The tide of popular favor yesterday setting so exultantly toward the young man, now turned with more than equal swiftness and swept Jack with it along that hypothetical course Pekin had for so long marked out for him.

And this while Jack was holding open the gate for Mrs. George and the governor, the serene smile still on his lips and a merry tune in his heart.

"A pretty justice indeed, an' a human soul asked of him this day," said one of the finally dissolving crowd, for Irene's fate seemed to have been at last determined.

This was partly but the exaggerated language of the country, but proved quite true.

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After their respective dinners, Sam Limecooly and Will Triplow, as agreed, went slowly and thoughtfully up to the George mansion.

They had discussed with some earnestness the best manner of approaching Jack on the subject. Intimate as they were with Jack, he was not a young man whose more personal affairs were apt to be a matter of conversation in his presence.

"It is n't a question of the girl, but of the election," Sam had wisely urged. "Put at him politically, it's as much our business as his."

Will would have preferred to take a more romantic view of the situation. Miss Dyer's story had contributed the essential element to Irene's disappearance. Will had not even confided to Sam the story as it rose to conclusive proportions in his own mind.

Jack met them at the door. He was surprised, for midday visiting was a form of Sunday-breaking not in vogue at Pekin. But he was just as glad to see them.

"Not come in?" for Will was making silent but emphatic objections, not wishing to be heard inside, and as he felt became the mystery of the occasion.

"No, Jack, I want to talk to you about the election. Let's go up to your den," said Sam.

"All right, but you need n't be so eloquently solemn about it."

They climbed up the outside stairs.

"It must be very pressing," Jack said, over his shoulder. "Have you had your dinners? I'll ask Aunt George to set you a couple of plates. The exigencies of the campaign excuse everything in Aunt George's eye. No? There's your mistake. The dinner is got up to meet the governor's appetite, and that's a noble one. Now, fire away." Jack motioned to seats and tossed himself on the lounge.

Sam felt the difficulties increase. He plunged his hands in his pockets, as if he might find his missing diplomacy there.

“ Jack, do you know where ’s Irene Burke ? ”
he asked, bluntly.

“ What has that to do with the election ? ” Jack
returned, with equal bluntness.

“ Everything, perhaps.”

“ I don’t see it.”

“ Never mind, answer my question. Where ’s
Irene Burke ? Do you know ? ”

“ No. Yes, and it ’s none of your blamed business.”

“ It is your business.”

“ I don’t see that,” said Jack, still on his back.

“ Well, I ’ll make it plain to you, and there ’s
no use in your getting huffy about it.”

“ Yes, Jack, it is really quite serious. Much
depends on your answer,” ventured Will.

“ Bah ! ”

“ Where have your eyes and ears been all morning ? ” asked Sam. “ Have n’t you seen everybody staring at you ? ”

Jack colored. He felt he might justly be accused of vanity.

"There's nothing new in that."

"It's funny you did n't see the difference," said Sam, thoughtfully, reading Jack's mind. Jack colored again, and got on his feet. He could not lie still with those fellows looking into his face. He remembered his complacent thoughts as he sat in church. How little it mattered to him that people stared. What better could they find to look at? He felt a burning sense of humiliation as he recalled his gratification at the situation. He cursed his conceit. He realized now that he wanted, craved, the good opinion of humble Pekin. It all passed through his mind like a flash.

"Tell me plumply what all this means."

"Irene Burke can't be found."

"You mean she is n't in Pekin," said Jack, impatiently walking up and down the floor.

"She told Mrs. Maule she was going home, and she is n't at home."

"She did n't confide in Mrs. Maule. That's plain, but of no importance," he interrupted.

"But she is wanted at home, her mother is at the point of death, and she can't be found."

"Why did n't you say that before? You pretended you wanted to talk about the election."

"Then you can find her?"

"I don't know whether I can or not, but drop it now."

"I'll be hanged if I do. I have n't worked, pulled wires, and lied for you to have it go for nothing. You've got to clear this thing up for your own sake. That Dyer woman's spreading a pretty story, and the Martin people have hooked on to it."

"I don't want to hear her accursed story."

"You know it, do you? Very well. After that ride with you, Rene went home, slung her things in a trunk and went away. She has n't been heard of since. There's where you come in."

Jack kept up his tramp across the floor. Sam waited for a moment.

"A young man who expects to be made an overseer of the law can't afford to have the disappearance of a young woman on his hands, and that's just where it is."

Still Jack said nothing.

"If you can tell where Irene Burke is, it's all right. But if you don't, I wouldn't give a picayune for your chances."

Again Sam paused.

"The town seems very much aroused," insinuated Will.

"Will you tell? Will you explain? I can easily make it all right for you, if you will."

"I'll be essentially damned if I do!" roared Jack, planting himself in front of them.

When the two disgusted and disappointed young men had gone, Jack went to the stables, put Fancy in harness, and started for Sparta. How odious was the well-known road. He hated it, every turn. He drove into Sparta in his accustomed manner, effective on weekdays, but now, on Sunday, to the orderly church-

going people on their way to afternoon service the flying wheels and sharp click of Fancy's feet seemed an impudent disregard of the laws of God and man. But Jack was thinking of neither.

He drove up to the telegraph office, but found it closed. He jumped in the buggy and went to the station. That, too, was locked. He drew out a time-table. "Two hours. I'll be dashed if I wait."

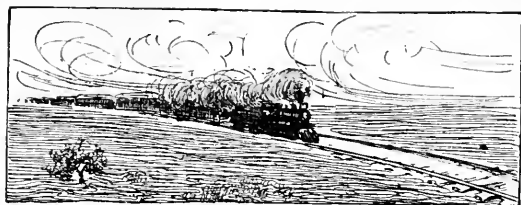
Fancy sped again, and Jack sprang out and knocked peremptorily at a white frame house. A girl came around the corner from the kitchen door. Such a response indicated the absence of all the principals. Jack execrated his luck. Leaving Fancy, he walked up the street to a brown house with a verandah, and pulled the bell loud enough to overcome the sounds of a cabinet organ within. The door opened and he disappeared, to reappear with a sullen-looking young man who went with him to the telegraph office. There Jack wrote three tele-

grams addressed to Miss Camille Lamar, and sent them to three different towns. To the youth who sent them they seemed unimportant, and warranted no such pressing haste. He resented more than ever being dragged away from the cabinet organ and the young lady who presided there.

But the service rendered, Jack took him over to the Palace Hotel, where, descending an inside staircase they found entrance to the "Home Circle," inhabited now by a few commercial travellers. Here they smoked several cigars. The commercial men relieved Jack of further burden of entertainment, and Jack left the youth listening to strange tales of a far city.

When Jack finally drove through the darkened streets of Peking, light streamed from the church windows, and the Rev. Mr. Sparkins was making a personal appeal in the interests of public morality and decency that the light and unworthy might be signally discomfited.

The light and unworthy, in the light of recent events, everyone understood to be Jack Racer, and that the influence of the congregation was to be directed toward making Squire Martin's son-in-law a squire.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

XXII

The Squire is Awakened to the Hour's Perils



F this new element in the campaign Squire George knew nothing. While furthering Jack's interest, he had done it in his own way.

Personally he maintained a discreet and dignified attitude. Moreover, he inspired a certain awe. Being a large, well-dressed man, with a bank account and outside interests as far away as New Orleans, he would not be addressed by everyone on such a subject. The Governor had left on the Sunday night train. Sunday travelling was not favorably regarded at Pekin, but executed in the twilight it seemed far less heinous than in the broad light of afternoon.

The squire had not seen his nephew since dinner, for when Jack came home from Sparta he sought the solitude of his own room. When he appeared late at breakfast the next morning, the squire felt too well satisfied with the way things were going to reproach the young man for habits that so little became a candidate the day before election.

The squire's respect for Jack had increased immensely. He was prepared for the easy way in which he walked into people's affections. He expected to see men working for him, and hallooing their throats hoarse; but the young man had shown a strength of mental fibre he had not suspected, and a disposition to cut out new paths for himself that seemed to sustain his fondest hopes.

As the squire looked at his nephew this morning he was more clearly than ever convinced he was right. Jack was unusually grave and with a gravity that became a future legislator. The squire got up from the table in a serene mood.

"What is the programme to-day, Jack?"

"I'm going with Knowles to McCormick's Run. That will about finish the business," applying himself to another egg.

"You and Knowles make a pretty good team. I should say Knowles had modeled his oratory on the lines of a cyclone. But it tells. Your own way is n't bad, young man. But did you ever see anybody so elementary and condescending as the governor? Now, you don't know more than everybody else."

Jack gave a short laugh.

"And you don't pretend to. Pshaw, there are fashions in all things as much as in your aunt's bonnets. It made me laugh to hear that old cock's pump-handle eloquence," sitting down to discuss his late guest more comfortably.

"It was pretty dry, all the same."

"You see, the governor's getting a leetle past his prime. When he is n't soft-soaping, he's browbeating. Now that's *passy*, as the novel-

writers say. The people are n't fools, and they know when a man's talking from the outside or from the inside. There's just where you got the handle. You put it to 'em straight. If you'd laid awake nights, you could n't have hit anything neater than that easy, man-to-man style of yours."

"I believe, Uncle, you think I selected it out of a sample lot," poking holes in the tablecloth with his fork, as he spoke.

"Not at all. It's temperamental. I told you in the beginning you were cut out for this sort of thing."

Jack ground his teeth together.

"But here's where I was wrong. I thought your success would be merely personal—address, magnetism, dash—"

"Cheek?" queried Jack.

"If you like. You said it. I didn't. What I didn't think was that you had such a grip in larger matters."

"It all depends, Uncle, on which way you

switch your thoughts — a question of direction."

"Politics, not pool, eh? Well, the chief thing is, you got hold of something vital. The people here don't care two pins about civil service reform and all such abstractions, but they're touched mightily when the boxing and freight cost more than they can realize on the fruit, and sweat like horses over local rates that they have to pay for the infernal cut-throat competition on the through lines. I've thought all the time it would be well for you to take up a specialty. There it is."

"But aren't you a sort of attorney for the road?"

"A bit of pettifogging. But that's all the better for you, see? Independence and all that. It'll railroad you into the governor's chair — well managed. Besides, in the long run it pays to be on the side of the people, and your career, if I'm a judge, is n't going to be snuffed out in a jiffy."

"But, Uncle, does n't it occur to you that I may get left?" He straightened his legs under the table and looked up under his eyebrows.

"Left, your granny! If there ever was any doubt, on Saturday it flew to the winds. By Zux," he exclaimed, with sudden reminiscence, "with tears in my eyes, I could n't quite credit it."

"Credit what?"

The squire got up from his chair.

"That was a touch, Jack. I never came so near thinking you weren't genuine through and through. But I believe you are, boy, I believe you are."

A shadow passed across the young man's face. The rack, he thought, was nothing to this.

"Now there's another point in your favor. You're sympathetic. Now you're not the sort of fellow to hang out your emotion, but when you do, it tells. Now there," with a wave of his hand and resting one foot on a chair, "merely,

you know, merely as an appropriate element, in a maiden speech, among old friends, among familiar faces, nothing could have been better. It polished off the whole business."

Jack opened his lips, but, growing in wisdom, he changed his position and did not speak.

"Bless my soul, it's nearly ten o'clock. By the way, Jack" — the squire turned at the door — "if you are going out to the Run, I would n't say much about law, order, and that sort of thing. Old McCormick himself was once collared by the Vigilants for horse-stealing; but just whoop it up on the railroads."

When his uncle had gone, Jack sat still, his legs under the table and his chin on his breast, until he was recalled by the manœuvres of Margaret peeping in at him through the door, and in terror lest the neighbors catch her breakfast table standing at so unholy an hour.

"Come, Margaret," he called. "You and I have both got to get through this day somehow. Heaven help you if Samantha Dyer catches

your dishes unwashed, and as for me, well, I've got to go it alone."

Squire George went about his affairs assured that Jack needed no further help from him. It was an inward source of joy that while old Martin's coat-tails were flying around every corner, he could leave Jack's affairs to take care of themselves. Of what other fellow, he asked himself, could that be said on the day before election? It justified all the hopes he had placed on the boy. Outwardly the squire was ostentatiously indifferent. His walk was slower, his manner more reserved than usual. He spoke to several men as he went along, but on remote topics, — the price of wheat in the east and the prospect of war in Europe. Sam Limecooly was not in the mood to talk about Bulgaria and the Czar.

"Where is Jack this morning?" he asked, with some abruptness, after listening to the squire on the decline of England as a factor in international affairs.

"Jack? Jack, oh, he's dawdling over his breakfast," pride struggling through his assumed indifference. "If you want to see him, you'd best hurry. I remember he's going to get Knowles out of a sort of coil at McCormick's Run. What do you say to that for a beginner?"

"Say? Why, that charity begins at home."

"Oh, he's all safe. Sam, has n't Jack surprised you out of your boots?"

"Then he has —" but the squire did not wait for interruptions.

"He'll sweep the town. No doubt about it. Then next year we'll give him to the county."

Sam groaned; evidently, Jack had n't.

"Hold on, Squire, there's a little complication. That's what I want to talk to you about."

"Complication? There's where you're off. I never saw a cleaner furrow."

"It's an outside matter," Sam mumbled, "but it's playing hob generally."

The squire smiled benevolently at fears so little befitting young blood.

"Very well. Come, Sam, let us go back to the office, and we 'll talk it over. Good morning, Doctor; fine day. I was on my way to see you about that bay of yours, but it will hold over. Limecooly has a little legal point he wants me to settle for him."

The squire let no little artistic touches be wanting to the part he had marked out for himself. The two men said no more until they got into the office.

"The long and short of it is, Jack is going to be defeated unless he 'll set a matter straight. He can do it; but he won't."

"Pooh, pooh, Limecooly! What is it? I 'll attend to it myself."

"That is the worst of it; you can't, that is, unless you can influence Jack. I can't."

"I 'll do that," said the squire, airily, "but unload, man."

"You know Miss Burke?"

"A woman, eh? Yes, I know her. One of Jack's flames."

"She's missing, and Jack knows where she is."

"And won't tell! A woman's secret; Jack's a gentleman."

"Look here, Squire, to put it in plain English, a feeling's got abroad that Jack is responsible, and that there is something pretty black about the whole business."

"Now, Sam, for a sober-headed fellow," said the squire, blandly, "are n't you putting it pretty strong?"

Sam felt his tale was befitting that romantic youth, Will Triplow, and blushed rosily.

"That's neither here nor there; of course, you and I know it's all poppycock."

"I should say Jack is a philandering sort of fellow, but he would n't harm a fly, much less anything that wears petticoats."

"But don't you see, Squire, the handle it gives. The preachers had him for a text last night;

you know what that means. The whole town's in a ferment. Look!" Sam sprang to the window; the squire followed him, but Sam pressed him back.

"Don't give them that satisfaction." A crowd of men, women and boys were passing, who looked curiously at the office, scanning the upper windows. "Do you take in the sense of that? They pretend to be hunting Rene Burke. They're going to drag Martin's pond, and another gang is beating the timber."

"Drag Martin's pond! The whelps!" The squire watched from his retreat until the last boy had turned the corner.

"That was the reason old Martin was flying around all morning like a hen on a hot griddle," Sam nodded.

"They don't believe it, themselves, but it will lay Jack out just as hard — that is, unless he explains. A word from him would settle it. Jerusalem Crickets!" said Sam, waxing angry as he spoke. "He owes it to us, if he don't

to himself or the girl, but he's obstinate as a mule."

The squire's face had lost its mask of indifference. He was white with rage.

"The thing is serious, I see that, Sam. Now tell me the whole story."



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

XXIII

Curious Social Attentions Follow Unpopularity



AFTER his midday dinner the squire set out for McCormick's Run. He had never meddled in Jack's feminine affairs and he now felt like a coward ; but he was a coward pursued by a still greater danger. So he pushed on. He meditated on what he should say. Just how much lay underneath this story that was convulsing the little town, he did not know. That there was enough to warrant his approaching Jack as the uncle of his nephew, he believed. He thought of several ways of opening the conversation, but each seemed alike too serious and too impertinent. Finally, as did Sam, he concluded to keep the matter purely political.

From afar he saw the little red schoolhouse in which the meeting was held, and his heart sank. As he approached, the men leaning against the fences and grouped about the doorway suddenly vanished into the house and a couple of girls in sun-bonnets scurried across the meadow.

"Jack's speaking," he said, with a complacent smile.

Jack was speaking. As Squire George tied his horse he heard the crowd laugh, and Jack's insinuating tones.

"I won't go in," he thought. "He'll know why I came."

He saw a knothole in one of the red boards, and, leaning by its side, he applied there his eye. Standing on a level he could see Jack's knowing legs. He watched them curiously and with admiration. On their changing and easy movement he predicated the young man's upward and more important half.

Finally, his curiosity getting more insistent, he

stooped until he could get the range of Jack's face. He could not hear what he said, but watched, in a way entranced, the play of Jack's features, the comical glance, the upward turn of the mouth. Thus he anticipated the suggestive epithet, the pointed phrase, and Jack's pause of half surprise when the liberal guffaws interrupted his speech.

"Was there ever such a boy?" he thought, then groaned.

For a man of the squire's parts, peeping through a knothole was not a dignified position. When a boy came out to look after a restless horse, he realized this, and straightened himself with alacrity.

"When Mr. Racer is through speaking, will you hand him my card?" he took occasion to say.

The boy eyed the card with awe, then stretched forth a dirty little paw.

The house broke into applause and presently Jack came forth.

"You, Uncle George? The boy said, 'a gentleman.' I supposed I'd find a girl-hand." Jack laughed, and the squire pointed to the card in his hand, which the young man, in his exhilaration, had not noticed.

"Jack, you know why I'm here. Oh, boy!" dropping his voice.

"Yes, I know." His face sobered. "I'm sorry, Uncle, but it can't be helped."

"Don't say that, Jack. Tell me the trouble, Jack, I'll set it straight."

"There's nothing to tell — only they think differently in Pekin."

"What has become of that girl, Jack?"

Jack blushed.

"I can't say, Uncle."

"Won't, you mean?"

"If you care to put it that way."

"Don't you think you owe it to the girl to stop that howling mob over there?"

Jack put his hands in his pockets and dug his heels in the turf.

"Do you know that they 're dredging Martin's pond and ransacking the timber?"

Jack gave an insolent laugh.

"Don't laugh, Jack. It's too horrible. But don't think, boy, I don't trust you."

"Uncle, listen. The thing has got to go on for all I can do. What I most feel is your disappointment; for, of course, I know the upshot of the whole matter. Put Pekin on a moral scent, and she'll bury her nose in mire. Very well, let them have it."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Just what I would have done in any case, no more, no less."

Jack was not a person who needed to reiterate his position. The squire urged no more.

"Very well, Jack. You know best," he said, meekly.

"Don't think I'm insensible to your coming out here," Jack said, in a low voice, following his uncle to the hitching-post.

His tone gave the squire new courage.

“ Jack, if you have got into any sort of trouble — that young woman — ” falling into new embarrassment, “ young men will be young men — ”

“ If I get into a hole, Uncle, I ’ll claim your hand,” the young man answered, calmly. “ You may be sure of that.”

The squire jumped into his buggy and drove away, feeling an untoward sense of shame. To relieve himself he fell to abusing Pekin — its rival lawyers and candidates, its finely-scented nose for scandal, its unholy zeal in discovering wrongdoing, its peculiar methods of punishment. “ Damned curious, hypocritical, co-horting — ” but there can be no profit in following out the squire’s train of thought, although it was sweetly satisfactory and calming to his ruffled spirit.

Knowles preferred to remain behind and take supper with young McCormick, who was still on the fence ; and left Jack to go home alone. Fancy took her own leisurely way, and Jack

was not averse. The day had given him sufficient food for thought. The squire had refrained from telling Jack the details of the uproar in town, but Jack had heard something of it from a returned farmer. But as McCor-mick's Run had no voice in the selection of a justice, the story had not greatly appealed to that neighborhood.

Jack felt it first like the lash of a whip. Chaffing with the farmers and mill-hands, a tumult of thoughts raged through his brain. While he was speaking, his manner still easy and self-possessed, his speech clear-cut, his humor adapting itself to the situation, above all he felt his anger beat and rage, and finally sink into weakness and silence.

When his uncle came, Jack was calm; his mind accepted the situation; his anger was gone. He now felt sad, inexpressibly sad, as he drove slowly home.

As we know, he was not a young man much given to retrospection, but he looked

back now and felt himself truly a creature of fate.

Was this what he had intended ? He had set about making himself worthy a bright young creature, who some way had found a place in his heart, and whom he now felt necessary to any future he could conceive for himself. What better motive could inspire any man ? he asked himself ; and at the thought he felt a warm current thrill his body and illumine his face. Then he had performed an act of self-sacrifice to please his uncle. No one knew how great a sacrifice it had been. But he had found a certain pleasure in it, after all, and certainly what appeared to be its results were gratifying. And now this was the outcome. Pah ! A vulgar story. He felt his new life defiled. He had never troubled himself much before about what people said of him. Now he felt stained. “ And others — what did they think ? ” “ She has heard it all. She has had to think — ” New anger stirred within him. He threw

out his hand as if to ward off something, with a man's manly impulse to shield those who are dear to him from even the knowledge of evil — to preserve the blush to the rose, the bloom to the plum. He groaned in his impotence. With a movement of despair he threw up his head and afar, at the side of the road, saw two figures. One, stiff, elderly, carrying a basket, walked sedately forward. The other, young and lithe, swinging a tin pail, darted from side to side among the brown grasses.

"A robin among the stubble," said Jack, and quickly gathered up the idle lines. Fancy bounded forward. As he approached, Jack felt that he had yielded to a reckless impulse. Why did he not stay in the background where he belonged?

Aunt Kiz turned her head.

"Oh! It's you," she said dryly.

"Yes. Can't I give you a lift?"

"Well, no, hardly," she said, with a quick resentment against Jack's buggy, which, as the

scene of Miss Burke's tears, had figured somewhat largely, as we know, in the public mind. "We 're huntin' butter and nestin' for eggs," she said, recovering herself. Then, again with her old wilfulness, —

"It seemed a good afternoon to come to the country."

Jack flushed.

"At least, let me take your baskets, if you won't come with me. They 're heavy. I think you can trust me that far," not caring to ignore her meaning.

Lucy was in advance, her arms full of the rich spoils of the wayside, brown, red, purple, and gold. Her heart was sore and she had not cared to turn around. But now Aunt Kiz's sharp words fell on her ear.

"Thank yè, all the same. Lucy and I can carry our own burdens."

Going directly toward the buggy, Lucy held up her bundle of grasses.

"If Jack will take these, I'm sure I'll be

awfully obliged. Jack, will you?" and confidently laid her treasures at his feet.

Jack did not speak, but drew wells of comfort from one downward glance into her eyes.

"You know I can send Billy to the stable after them," she said, rejoining Aunt Kiz. And he left them.

When Fancy was stalled Jack went directly to his room. He had lost the exhilaration that sustained the remainder of his drive. He had never troubled himself deeply about his Aunt George, but it seemed a sort of degradation that even she might have heard the gossip of Pekin. Many things had been kept from her, he knew. He felt now no more fit to present himself before her than if he had had on muddy boots and splashed trousers. "Mire is mire," he said to himself.

Nor did he care to listen to the details of the dragging of Martin's pond, prattled possibly by his aunt in an unaccustomed attempt to be angry. Without making a light he tossed him-

self on the lounge and buried his face in the pillows.

How long he lay there he did not know, evidently he had been asleep. Now he heard a creaking on the stairs; then the rustle of petticoats and an ominous scratch across the sole of a shoe. A faint flicker, and the tiny flame of a tallow candle sprang into life.

"Women, as I'm a sinner." Jack, all his senses now alert, sank back on the lounge, and fortified his position by the pillows behind which he distinguished Miss Dyer and the faithful Bergan.

Jack's sense of humor revived as he watched them tiptoeing about his room, peering into the closets, and —

"By Jove, under the bed! After burglars?" he queried gleefully to himself.

All this time they had not spoken. Mrs. Bergan had essayed several attempts, but Miss Dyer held up a warning finger, and she swallowed her words with a curious gurgle.

At last they rested in their search, and sat down in Jack's comfortable chairs. Miss Dyer sniffed audibly at the luxury they represented, but Mrs. Bergan bounded up and down in great contentment, then, flinging her body around, buried her nose in the depths of her chair.

"Leather!" she made silently with a great, round mouth.

"Why don't ye speak out, Mis' Bergan, a-makin' faces that's redikilous to see."

"But ye tol' me not. I never met up with a woman, S'manth, as is as onreasonable —"

"Tut! There's nobody here, as I'd thought you'd a-seed. Wherever that poor girl may be, if she's on top of this yearth, she ain't hyar."

Jack gave a prolonged, but silent, Oh-h-h!

"As for him," Miss Dyer said, with emphasis,

"he's soft-sawderin' up to McCormick's."

"Then I'd like to peek round a little, seein' as we're here."

"Ye'll be none the better for it, Mis' Bergan, mark my words," answered Miss Dyer, while Mrs. Bergan was snuffing the waning candle with her fingers.

"Well, I've been a married woman, S'manth," answered Mrs. Bergan, rising to those heights which a married woman can always command, "an' what might n't be right or maidenly in a girl like you, ain't goin' t' phase me."

"Rubbitch," answered Miss Dyer. "Bergan's been dead twenty year."

But Mrs. Bergan was on her way, tiptoeing with a fine sense of fitness, her candle snuffed and burning. Before Jack's well-fitted buffet she paused and put down her light. Then, taking out the stoppers she buried her nose in each decanter, emitting at each a significant and varied sniff.

"If ary one of us had a pain we could take a nip," she said.

"I believe you've a hankerin', Mis' Bergan," Miss Dyer said sternly, from her chair.

"Well, I'm dry enough to dreen Jordan. I'd like to find a drink of water."

"Humph! I don't s'pose Jack Racer ever teches water. They do say Mis' George don't drink it without a lump of ice. I know she's got a big silver pitcher."

With a final sniff, Mrs. Bergan reluctantly passed on, pausing to finger a silk quilt on the foot of Jack's bed. Then she brought both her eyes and candle to bear.

"Lined with Mis' George's secon' day dress. You remember that sheeny yallerated purple Turk satin, S'manth."

Carefully she steered her way among the chairs, making side excursions to the wall where Jack's highly-colored pictures made themselves seen even in the light of a solitary tallow dip.

"Humph! I'll be bound, racin' critters goin' lickety split."

She lifted her head, and, as if by a magnet, she bore toward the adjoining wall, ashy horror overspreading her face.

A glance, then she dashed toward Miss Dyer musing in the depths of the leather chair, and clutched her shoulder.

"It's all true, every word of it's true!"

Miss Dyer sprang up.

"What is it ye've found, Mis' Bergan? Tell me. Is it — is it — Blood?" Her voice sank into a husky whisper.

Mrs. Bergan had hold of her arm, pulling her to the wall, while the wobbling candle in the other hand was dropping streams of grease.

"Or is it a bit of one of her gyarments?"

"It's a shameless female, with nigh to nothin' on, pintin' her leg most unnatcheral."

"An' you've given me sich a start for a pictur? You are the beatenest woman!" exclaimed Miss Dyer, justly angry at being jerked back from the heels of a tragedy in such a frivolous manner.

"But only look at her, S'manth, a-pintin' her toe as easy as you'd pint your ring finger."

"It's nothin' but an ornery circus woman."

"She's a purty young thing, too." Mrs. Bergan held the candle nearer. "May be she ain't no mother. I s'pose she had to dress that way or she could n't manage her toe."

"Mebbe, you'll say, she had to have her photograph took for Jack Racers to buy. 'Sich conductions!"

Mrs. Bergan became tenderly reminiscent.

"Many's a time at home we girls tried to touch the mantelpiece with our feet. Elviry could do it easy, but I was allays stiff-knit. Now I shouldn't be surprised if this girl thought the photograph man had his head under the black cloth an' did n't see her."

"An' he lookin' through the peep-hole all the time, as she ought to a know'd."

A scratch of a match, a sudden light, and Jack came forward with a lamp. The two women were so absorbed that they heard nothing until he stood by their side. The lamp seemed to have the light of a central sun.

"Land a massy !" exclaimed Mrs. Bergan, letting her candle fall.

"Never mind," said Jack. "The lamp's worth twenty candles. I'm glad you find my picture worth your notice. It's Fanny Ellsler, a famous dancer, you know, before you and I were born, Miss Dyer." He bowed gallantly.

"But come, I have several other things quite worth seeing. I don't often have ladies to visit me and I'm disposed to make the most of it. Be careful of that stool, Mrs. Bergan." The women, still too astonished to speak, followed him silently.

"This is Eclipse, a famous racer. But — I can't expect you to be interested in the turf. Let me show you something better worth your attention. Here is a sampler my grandmother worked. It was almost in tatters, but I've had it framed. Look at those funny flower-pots. Here is her name. Step up on the sofa, Mrs. Bergan; you too, Miss Dyer."

The women climbed up obediently and bent their noses to the faded stitches.

“Can you read it? ‘Elizabeth Campbell is my name. Clermont County is my Dwelling Place.’ I can just remember her. I know she saved me many a spanking. But perhaps you think if I had had more spankings I’d have been a better chap.” Miss Dyer essayed to speak. “What, you must go? Oh, don’t apologize. I am only too proud to have ladies visit me under any circumstances. Let me light you down.”

In spite of Mrs. Bergan’s waving hand, for she had not yet found her tongue, Jack stepped before them, lamp in hand, and preceded them down the stairs.

He opened the door of the office and the women stepped out. He followed them to the step. The light of his lamp held high in his hand, fell on a crowd of men, women, and children, who had been waiting there to hear the women report.

Jack's eyes flashed fire.

"If any of you curs will come up into my room, I will be glad to extend its hospitalities to you — and then to pitch you out of the window."

The men shrank back into the darkness and he shut the door.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



XXIV

The Campbell Family "Stands By" Nobly



THE next morning ushered in election day. The householders were up betimes. The men hurried through their breakfasts to be off, get their shutters opened, shops swept, and goods disposed for the country trade, which was always lively and matinal on election day.

The women were no less in haste, darting in and out of doors with pails of water which they dashed over the front doorsteps and stone flags. This was an essential ceremony. Here they would in all probability sit and catch the floating gossip of the street when obliged to be at home. For, as has been intimated, there was no etiquette in Peking which forbade women sallying forth on election day to learn what

was abroad. This, it seems, in a republic is quite an ideal state of affairs.

To this early stir the George household was an exception. After the cordial invitation given to the men waiting for the descent of Mrs. Bergan and Miss Dyer, Jack went upstairs in lighter spirits. He had filliped a stone. He hoped it hurt somebody. The whole affair, by his light, was so ridiculous that he longed to share it with somebody. No, he could wait. At least he would tell Sam and Will of the women's visit. So he plunged his head in cold water, refreshed his toilet, and sallied out into the darkness as fresh and smiling as the morn he would probably greet before he found his bed.

Sam roared lustily over Jack's description of the tiptoeing Bergan and the results of her tour about his room. But Will, who we know was a student of human nature, was more than ever secretly impressed with Jack's character. In his view, Jack was dancing on the

brink of a volcano. It interested him to see this perilous feat. To be one of the intimates of a fellow who could do this sort of thing was a matter for gratulation.

The next morning Jack was not so mirthful. He came in languidly to the late breakfast. The squire wondered silently how Jack would comport himself. Of course the game was up, but would Jack admit it? Again he was at sea regarding his nephew, who appeared to have springs of action altogether out of his experience, which gave him a feeling of helplessness quite unusual to the masterful squire. Mrs. George perceived nothing unusual in the situation.

“‘Lo, the conquering hero comes,’” she said, reaching for the coffee-pot.

Jack grimaced, and gave his uncle a comical smile.

“Aunt George, if I’m not elected I’m coming home to bury my face and cry in your apron, as I used to when I stubbed my toe.”

"Jack, you never were a boy to whimper! Have you forgotten Amelia Maria?"

"The squirrel? Never."

"When Amelia Maria ran back to the timber you did come in with big tears and laid your head in my lap. I tried to cheer you, and you said: 'It did n't love me, or it would n't have run away,' then burst into tears."

"Poor little chap. I'm sensitive to that sort of thing now."

Mrs. George easily strayed along by any conversational thread. As Jack seemed disposed to encourage her, the squire got up from the table. In the face of staring facts he was in no mood for such fooling.

"Jack, where will I meet you?" he asked, thinking he might venture that far to discover his nephew's intentions.

"I'll be about as usual, Uncle," answering what he understood to be his uncle's desire.

"I'll lend the moral support of my presence. That seems about all that can be done."

The squire took his resolution by both hands.

“It is n’t too late yet, Jack, to —”

Jack held up one hand, and averted his face.

The squire said no more, but started down the walk, wishing he had held his speech.

Jack’s intentions were, in fact, not clearly outlined in his own mind. He knew he meant to be about as usual. That of course. But he felt unusually shy at exposing his presence in the Pekin streets. He sat still for some minutes; then rose hastily with a cheery word, and bent his brow to his aunt’s lips.

“For good luck,” he said.

“What can a woman’s kiss do, Jack?” she asked, with a gratified flush.

“What?” exclaimed the young man, in genuine astonishment. “It can make the world go round. Unluckily, you little women don’t know it.”

At length he sauntered forth, stopping to put a late-blooming aster in his buttonhole. In Pekin a man did not wear flowers in his but-

tonhole unless he was going to be married or to assist at some such festal occasion. Jack's posy now gave the usual jaunty air to his appearance. But, in fact, his mood was quite subdued.

As he walked along, he saw without looking, women run to the windows, peep out curiously, and draw hastily back behind the altheas and sweetbriers. The children stopped playing and looked at him silently, then began to whisper behind their hands. The girls going home from early shopping, with cambric or beef-steak in brown paper parcels, nodded shyly and passed on. He felt sure they turned and looked at him, and felt shivering chills run up his spine.

"I feel as if I had lost my wife or had just come home from New York," he laughed to himself.

The polls had long been open. Groups of men stood on the corners and upheld the trees. Attached to one of these was Jake Durstine,

who, seeing Jack approach, hastily came forward.

Jack was touched by Jake's eager effort to show his friendship. The other men looked shamefaced and Jack knew he had been under discussion. Embarrassment sat even on Jake's face, red with the combined efforts of the weather and many juleps, and standing out against the background of sallow faces of Pekin proper.

“Good morning, Jake. Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Mornin', Jack.”

“Mornin'.” The men shuffled further back, and two edged behind the tree.

“Voting pretty brisk?”

“Lively a poll as ever I see. Limecooly's peddlin' out your tickets.”

“I'm safer in Sam's hands than my own. I've washed mine,” with an airy gesture.

The men looked at the white, slim, well-kept hands, until Jack stowed them in his pockets to cut off their gaze.

"Old Martin 's buzzin' about since five o'clock."

"He'll get the shakes, and want me to pay his doctor bills," said Jack.

"There 's his shay now," exclaimed one of the men.

"Who 's he got ?"

"It 's ol' Jess Lemmons. He 's been down two months with neurology of the nerves."

"Why, Jess, he 's a psalm-singer. They don't take no interest in politics."

"It 's the wimmen, his sisters. They wuship with the Methodis'. The parson teched up their duties Sunday night."

"So Lizy Ann said. I stayed home with the children. She 's all full of it."

"Females come out strong in a moral crisis."

"My ol' woman 's druv me nearly wild 'bout the 'responsibilities of householders.' It 's my opinion them preachers lie awake to git hold o' catchin' words to hook in the wimmen's ears like earbobs."

The two men defended by the tree regained their speech, and in the fertility of the subject forgot Jack's presence.

“The wimmen are dead agin you, Jack,” said Jake.

“Yes. That's what hits me, Jake. I'd rather be laid out by the men.”

“'Zactly. No man wants to be kicked by a mule,” answered Jake, who was a bachelor.

Jack laughed.

“That was n't my idea, Jake. As they know the course, a string of women will run pretty straight.”

The two men, perceiving they were overheard, sidled away with vague excuses of haste.

“Pore creeturs. Ain't either of 'em wuth shucks. They say Ab buttons the children's clothes mornin's. I see him myself milkin',” concluded Jake, with a sniff of scorn for such unmanly acts.

Jack walked along the street in a leisurely way, and saw with amusement, tempered by various

and less exhilarating emotions, how quickly his presence scattered a knot of men.

He felt himself to be in quite his usual manner. His cheery voice, his readiness to allude to the business and probabilities of the day, struck him as the right note.

"What the hang do they slink away for? I don't care a picayune how they voted."

It was this cheerful acceptance of the situation that was most embarrassing. In Pekin it was not customary to conceal one's feelings. Differences of opinion were likely to become personal grievances, and to be followed by organized silence. Who should speak first was left to accident, sometimes long delayed after the smart had healed.

Jack's conduct threw Pekin out of its reckoning, and placed it, although acting from a high moral standpoint, somehow unaccountably in the wrong. The men commented on it after they left him, and began to make excuses one to another for their actions. These sounded

nobly, but each went his way dissatisfied and unconvinced.

Jack now sat on a store box alone, cutting into it with great zeal and a show of absorbing occupation.

A small boy stood off a short distance, looking at him. Still without Jack's seeing him, he came up closer. Wrenching off a piece of a root he was chewing, he held it out in a friendly way.

“Have a piece of lickerish root, Jack?”

“Billy Campbell!” the young man exclaimed, with an odd gulp in his throat. For an instant he realized his isolation.

“Come.” He stuck out his boot and swung Billy on to the box beside him.

There seemed to be a moment of embarrassment for both. Jack went on with his whittling, but his heart felt cheerier.

Billy watched him silently for some minutes.

“I know that letter you're makin'. It's L.”

Jack gave a wide sweep with his knife.

"It's going to be a B for Billy."

"An' if the boys say 'Fools' names,' you know, to me, I'll kick 'em."

"Oh, I mus'n't help to break the peace," Jack laughed, and shaved away the letter.

Billy looked at him anxiously for some minutes, then spoke.

"Jack, we voted your ticket this mornin'."

"I knew I could depend on you every time."

"But it was a squally time, I can tell you," he said, confidentially. "Aunt Kiz has jus' been churnin' aroun' the house for two days. An' this mornin' she tol' father he'd got to go an' vote for Jack Racer, or she'd know the reason why. Father said he allays meant to, but he was n't goin' to be bullyragged by a woman, an' he did n't know whether he would or not. Then mother tried to dast him, but her jaws was tied up so tight she could n' speak."

"And Lucy, what did she say?" Jack dug harder into the wood than ever.

“Oh, Lucy ain’t any account in a row,” said Billy, with some contempt. “She jus’ opens her eyes an’ looks at you like our old cow. But, Jack, I went with father to see what he’d do, an’ he jus’ sung out : ‘Give me Racer’s ticket,’ an’ chucked it into the box.”

“Then I’m as good as elected, Billy.”

Billy looked grave.

“You don’ want to be squire very bad, do you, Jack ? ”

“Why not, Billy ? ” Billy thought a moment.

“You’ll have to hear a lot of cussin’ from bad men.”

Jack laughed.

“You are letting me down easily, Billy.”

Billy did not understand, but he was not a boy to announce the fact. His face sobered again. Jack returned to his knife, and Billy lifted his eyes and appeared to study the young man curiously, stretching his neck to see Jack’s back, and running his eyes down Jack’s trouser-legs.

Finally, impelled by some underlying curiosity, he spoke.

"Jack, when men don't like ladies what do they do with them?"

"Billy, men always like ladies," Jack answered, gravely.

Billy hesitated a moment.

"Bob Wally says they cut 'em up, and —"

"Good God!" Jack sprang off the box.

"Shut up, you imp. At least the babes and sucklings might be spared," he exclaimed, desperately. "Billy, look at me. Look at me straight in the eyes." The boy lifted his freckled face, his stubbed nose, and honest gray eyes. "There, now. Go about your business."

Billy stole his hand into Jack's palm. The young man smiled, but his eyes grew misty.

"It's all right, Billy. Now, skip."

Billy bounded away, assured and lighter of heart. Jack watched him, his mobile features now grown hard. Then, shaking himself with an

oath, he went to Sam's room over the store, which had served him as political headquarters during this momentous campaign.

He sat down at a table and pulled over the electioneering documents — the political tracts and the flaming handbills bearing his own name. Strewn about were clippings from the country newspapers. He read with new interest accounts of his impressive oratory, of his distinguished appearance, of the importance of his family, of his wealth, his social attractions. Adjectives were truly not spared to set him forth. Sitting now here alone, having dissolved every group that he had come in contact with that day with the rapidity of an active chemical, the contrast struck him like a blow. Then he burst into a loud laugh.

“By Zux, if I am so soon done for, I wonder why I was begun for.”

He jumped up and strode up and down the room.

“Fate seems to be making a highly distin-

guished fool of herself," he said, with unusual discourtesy to the sex. "I'd like to see her photograph when she comes to her senses."

His face cleared, he began to whistle "Wait Till The Clouds Roll By," and went again into the street.

"I verily believe I'm hungry," feeling himself normal again. He looked at his watch. The George dinner hour had gone by.

"First I'll pay myself the compliment of voting and then I'll invade an oyster parlor."



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

XXV

Important News Comes Too Late



HERE were but few loiterers around the polls. The business of voting had been done early in the morning. Then the air was full of excitement.

Now, perhaps aided by the noon dinner,—heavy dumplings and unlimited pie,—a languid and depressing calmness hung over the scene.

The men giving out the ballots seemed to be too busy with their affairs inside to look up as Jack passed by.

He smiled softly to himself, and did not disturb them.

As he slipped his ballot in the box, one of the inspectors took occasion to remark politely :

“We are having fine weather, Jack.”

"Yes," answered Jack. "But I should n't be surprised if the weather changed."

Their voices seemed phenomenally clear, and their remarks full of weight.

Jack smiled again to himself, and went out into the street.

The dishes were washed, and women in afternoon calicoes and clean white aprons came sallying out of gates. Up the street a group of girls were talking in the shadow of a tree. Among them Jack recognized Anna Ross. They had seen him and were in animated and, as he approached them, embarrassing discussion. Two of the girls hastened away. Anna's face was red.

"Blood on the moon! She has been giving somebody a dressing," Jack thought.

The girls drew shyly back against the fence, but Anna intercepted him.

"How lucky, Jack. I'm going your way."

Jack lifted his hat, but Anna, deigning no word of farewell to her companions, marched at his side.

They walked on for some minutes without speaking, Jack too languid, Anna too intent on her intentions. She had the step of a grenadier and carried her head at an angle eloquent of defiance and disdain.

"I want to go down pumpway and see if my 'Designer' has come," alluding to a gazette of fashion by which the Pekin styles were regulated.

When this was accomplished she again broke silence.

"If you have n't anything better to do, Jack, come help me do my errands."

"Yours," he said. "I don't seem to be in demand."

Anna's errands cropped up like dragon's teeth. Jack found himself strolling through all the worthier parts of the town. The women sitting on the steps found sudden calls indoors as they approached. At such moments, Anna broke into sudden gayety and held her head aloft. "I feel like a dancing bear," thought Jack.

"I seem to scare the children," but he was at the same time amused and touched at Anna's pluck.

"I'm going now to Sam Limecooly's store to buy me a gingham apron."

"I'll help you to choose it. Sam will consider it a delicate attention if I drop in and ask how the election is going. Headquarters are in his loft."

Anna hesitated, but did not venture to speak. Instead, she was glad to cry out :

"There comes Amzi. He has his linen duster on. He must have been on the cars."

Amzi waved a carpet-bag and hurried to meet them. His face shone with heat and anticipation.

"Howdy, both of you ?"

"Where 've you been, Amzi ?" Anna demanded.

"Just from Potsdam. Jack, I mean to get one in for you yet."

"There's no hurry, my boy. The rush is over."

"What did you go to Potsdam for, Amzi?"

Anna returned to the charge.

"A matter of business. I just clipped over on the owl, Saturday night."

"You went to take some girl to meetin'."

"I carried mother's hymn-book then. She's visitin' Peninnah Lewis there. But if you want news, Anna, I've brung it."

The irradiation of Amzi's face increased. There was no doubt about the importance of his tidings. He could afford to delay a little.

"Yes," he said, sitting on the edge of a store box, braced by his feet, and carefully wrapping his long linen duster around his legs. "Yes, siree, I'm the man in possession of news. Now where do you think I was last night? Put on your guessin' caps now, will you?" slapping his right leg and readjusting his dust-coat.

"Wait a minute, Amzi. Here come Sam and Will. Paralyze us altogether."

The two young men came out of the store with melancholy step.

"Hurry, boys. Amzi's got a bomb, an' we'll all go off together."

"Hurry your great-grandmother," growled Sam.

"News, Amzi?" Will's face brightened.

"I was at Potsdam last night, boys, and where do you think I went?" Amzi looks all around, in smiling defiance.

"I went to the Cantata."

"Ah — h — h!" groaned his audience, and Jack shifted his position.

"Oh, I'm not done. Who do you think I saw there?"

"Old Stivers."

"The Haughty Haman."

"Yes," exclaimed Amzi, nodding his head, "and I saw somebody else — Miss Camille Lamar." This with the air of a man who has yet in reserve.

"By Zux! Then that telegram did n't catch her," Jack exclaimed.

The three turned to him. His face was clouded with anxiety.

"But," continued Amzi, not pleased with the interruption, "who is Miss Camille Lamar? There I have you."

"The prettiest girl in Potsdam," said Will. "And old Stivers had his arm around her," Sam added.

"Rene Burke." Amzi's bomb had exploded. Anna gave a little cry. To Amzi's surprise, his audience wheeled around to Jack, who was grinding his heel in thought.

"You knew this?" asked Sam.

"Yes."

"Why in the dickens did n't you tell it?"

"It did n't occur to me."

Amzi was aggrieved. He knew his news was interesting, and he had rehearsed the telling of it in the cars. To be thus despoiled of his triumph was bitter. He began to grow sullen.

"Oh," said he to the group still absorbed in

the silent young man, "if you all know so much, I'd a' better —"

"Don't be a fool," said Anna, amicably.

"Why in the name of common sense did n't you come home last night on the owl?" Sam turned to him angrily.

"Yes, Amzi, you should have come home last night; then we could have struck off posters," added Will.

Jack laughed aloud at this.

"Will, I'd have given a dollar to have read one."

"Well, if I'm to be bullied and kept out of all this —"

Amzi took his legs from out his duster.

"Sit down, silly." Anna pushed him gently.

"Hold, Amzi. Was there anybody with you when you saw Miss Burke?" asked Jack.

"Yes. Doc Dennis, and if you don't believe me, you can ask him."

"Amzi, you are old Truth from Truthville. We can't head Doc off. I've no more to say."

"Jack, you don't mean to screen her any longer?"

"I don't mean anything, Anna. The embargo's raised, whether I will or no."

"Now, fellows, this ain't fair. I've told you everything." Amzi rose to demand his rights.

"Stay, I don't want to hear it. Sam, this has been hard on you, old fellow. I'm not insensible." And Jack ran upstairs, leaving Will agape with admiration, and Amzi and Anna confidentially seated on the store box.

Jack felt relieved. He walked briskly about the lonely headquarters and among the mocking campaign documents, whistling a merry tune. Then he checked himself.

"I'd have kept it if I could," he said, as if in reproach.

As he mused, his uncle entered. Jack awaited him with a smile, but the squire's brow was heavy.

"They tell me that Burke girl has run off with that singing jack."

"That's putting it rather steep."

"And you knew it all the time!"

"Not all the time."

"Well, what part of the time? — If you'll be good enough to explain."

"When Knowles and I were campaigning, I saw Stivers's posters. From — from something I knew," — the young man hesitated — "I concluded Miss Camille Lamar was one of Rene's whims. It wasn't my place to sow it broadcast."

"But when that telegram came, sir, it was your duty to her mother."

"I did all I could. I drove to Sparta and telegraphed her on Sunday, but I'm deucedly afraid she did n't get it. By the way, have you heard how her mother is?"

"I don't know and I don't care. Jack, you've sacrificed us all. As pretty an election as ever I saw has been thrown away for that hussy."

"Don't call names. Rene's a good enough sort, Uncle. But she can take care of her-

self. I don't know but she'd enjoy this breeze. I didn't hold my tongue for her."

"Then will you please to tell me the meaning of all this quixotic business? I'm blamed if I know."

"This freak of Rene's may all come to an end, and Stivers's wife is in town. It would be rather hard on her, you see."

"What!" roared the squire.

He could understand some sacrifice for that handsome creature, Miss Burke.

"What! For that little, washed-out, straw-colored woman! Oh, Jack," he groaned in disgust. Then without further words, he turned on his heel and left the room.

Jack was once more alone.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



XXVI

Pekin Changes Its Mind and Lucy Discloses Hers



HERE was to be a bonfire that evening in front of the Martin residence to celebrate the triumph of the Martin son-in-law. The Martin residence was at the edge of town, the farm stretching backward. In that direction all Pekin streamed after supper was over, and by seven o'clock the town was silent and deserted. This argued nothing so far as Jack was concerned. Partisanship in Pekin could never have gone that far. If the feather of fortune had waved the other way and Squire George had built the bonfire, possibly the immediate Martin family might not have basked in its light, but the cousins and outer circle of rela-

tives, and all the voters of the Martin ticket, would have been just as promptly on hand.

The turn of the tide in Jack's favor had been immediate. As Sam had intimated, if Amzi had come home on an earlier train, Jack would have swept the town. As it was, before the kettles were put on for the early Pekin supper, the town was in possession of the facts. Men dropped in the stores and stood on corners to discuss them. Women made excuses to borrow eggs and tea of their neighbors to get a word, and to compare intelligence.

As Jack went home to supper he perceived that Pekin no longer averted its face. People went out of their way to speak to him. Men tried to be jocular, as if nothing had happened. The girls nodded shyly but eagerly, and with smiles. The women ran to the windows and pushed aside the sweetbriars and multiflora. Jack was amused, but presented the same appearance of easy unconcern.

He had much coddling at home from his Aunt

George. She knew nothing of the Miss Burke episode, it not being the custom of either Squire George or Jack to acquaint her with the unfragrant gossip of the place. But she knew that Jack had run behind his ticket. From having a husband in politics, she had long known that to run behind the ticket was an unspeakable disgrace. Squire George had language scarcely strong enough, in her presence, to express his contempt for such a man. He had not so expressed himself to-day, but his reticence, she believed, was due to the nearness of the connection. The truth was that Squire George, on reflection, felt this to be atoned for by Jack's attitude. He saw in it a certain heroic aspect, although it was prompted by meek little Mrs. Stivers instead of the handsome Miss Burke.

Mrs. George's tender ministrations were more than usually grateful to Jack. The day had told on his spirits. The sense of isolation which he had felt, he seemed now to feel even

more keenly that it was past. After all, he had been acting a part. He had cared. His unconcern was assumed. Although he knew it would come right in the end, his philosophy had been pumped from unwilling depths, and his constitution felt the strain.

He had no resentment, but his soul was weary. The patter, patter, of his aunt's placid sympathy fell on his heart like honey-dew.

"Oh, Aunt George, why can't women learn what they might be to men!"

He lifted his head and looked into her face, his eyes shining through their mists.

A deep, unsatisfied thirst sprang up in his heart. Then a blinding hope passed over him.

He sprang up, and laid his lips on his aunt's brow.

"How sweet and good you are," he said, and went out.

Moved to action by his vague longings, Jack believed himself to be wandering aimlessly through the silent streets, now lighted only by

the stars set in the deep blue of the November night. But these, as hunger and thirst to an animal, guided him with the directness of a conscious purpose.

Among the apple-boughs still waving a few withered leaves in the soft breeze, he saw a ruddy glow. Nearer it showed in bars of light through the cracks of a fence.

The fence was high, but not unkind. Looking through its rifts, Jack saw a large copper kettle swung across a pole from tree to tree. Under the kettle was a fire of chips and broken boughs, light wood that leaped into flame and with long tongues licked the kettle's sides.

Before the kettle, like a young priestess, Lucy stood. She held in her hand a long stick, making magic circles in the kettle's depths. Then, resting the stick, she fed the fire with heaping hands from a basket standing near. The flames lighted up her face and discovered its happy, peaceful smiles.

Jack leaped the fence and went towards her.

She dropped her stick with a little start, and came forward.

"Ah, you are smiling, Lucy. You are happy — and to-day," he exclaimed in reproach which his face denied.

"You are smiling yourself, Jack."

He took her hand, and they walked slowly back to the radius of the fire.

"Then you are not assisting at the Martin jubilee?"

"No," she exclaimed, indignantly, with a flash of her blue eyes.

Jack laughed with glee.

"Oh, I'm a vain wretch," he said.

"Besides, I have to finish the apple butter," she added.

"Hail apple butter, ambrosia of my days of innocence! But must you stir it all the time?" questioned the young man, dragging up the old settee.

"All the time. This is the anxious moment. You can feed the fire."

Jack brought the basket of chips in front of him, and began to supply the fire with measured hand, while the wand revolved in Lucy's hand. Such is the transforming effect of states of mind on any employment that to Jack this throwing chips on a fire seemed an occupation full of idyllic charm. Under its soothing influence his worn and perturbed spirit gathered new strength and definite self-assertion.

"I wish I had four legs, like a cow." A small figure loomed up in the firelight. "Then I would n't get so tired. Jack, sit over a little, won't you?"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Jack, severely.

"Where have you been?"

Billy looked at him cautiously out of the corner of his eye, and answered with reluctance:

"Well, I've been up to see the bonfire."

"I thought as much."

"It was an ugly old bonfire anyway. Jus' some old ramshackle barrels, and green wood and dirty boards."

"I don't think it's very polite of you, after enjoying Squire Martin's blaze, to talk about it in that way," continued Jack, with unabated severity.

" 'Little boys,' that's what Squire Martin said, 'you can jus' run round to the barnyard and bring more boards!' Well, I was n't carryin' boards for Martin's bonfire, so I jus' struck off for home."

"Lucy and I have a little bonfire of our own. Shall we share it with Billy?"

Lucy nodded.

"That means you can stir the apple butter," said the astute young man.

"No, no!" cried Lucy.

"Oh, let me help, Lucy!" — Billy slipped down from his seat. "I'm not a bit tired."

"No, you'll burn it."

"Burn it! I would n't burn it for a purty. I've got to eat a lot of that apple butter this winter and I jus' guess I'm not going to let it burn. Please, Lucy."

"Please Lucy," pleaded Jack.

"Then, Lucy, you can set down like a queen. Jack, do queens speak to people?" Billy asked, with sudden thirst for information.

"People, what people?" making way for Lucy, still hesitating, while Billy held her stick.

"Oh, people like you and Lucy."

"They always speak to me. As for Lucy, she speaks first."

"Billy, you can't reach the bottom standing on the ground," said Lucy, still anxious.

"I'll stand on the bucket."

"No. I'll run and get a soap box." She ran quickly down the path to the house.

"It always takes two to get a soap box," Jack said, and followed her, a gleam of white among the shadows. He leaned against a tree intercepting the path, to watch her. She had missed her search, and with a light, darting movement, came toward him, unawares. Jack opened his arms and she was imprisoned in his embrace.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a note of triumph as of joy. "You came to me yourself, Lucy. After all, you came to me yourself. My love, my love!"

For the moment she remained motionless, like a bird imprisoned in the hand, then moved in his arms as with softly fluttering wings.

"For months I have circled about you, longing but not daring to touch the hem of your garment," pressing her against his breast.

"Mine? mine?" she murmured.

"Ah, dear, you cannot think how humble a man feels in the presence of adorable womanhood. But you have come to me yourself. I hold you in my arms at last, at last, oh, my dear love!"

Still struggling to release herself, she said: "I came to you by chance, but it is you who detain me."

His arms fell.

"Dear, I obey your lightest breath. But you cannot leave me now. It is not for this I have

pressed you against my heart. I have longed for you so. You will not leave me now," he entreated.

She stood before him with clasped hands, irresolute.

"Is it because you don't trust me? You have believed what they said?"

"No, no, Jack. I knew you. It was impossible," she smiled, with half-closed eyes.

"It was impossible, Lucy, because I loved you."

"You loved me, Jack, then?"

"I cannot tell when I did not love you. But how could I disturb your sweet serenity? I loved you so I would not trust you with myself. If I could not make you happy, I would not make you unhappy."

She came toward him now, and, taking his arms, wound them about her.

"Jack, how little men know women. We would rather suffer near than be happy afar." She turned her sweet face up towards his and he covered it with kisses.

"My darling, my darling! If I had been scaling the ramparts of heaven I could not have had a diviner impulse than when I climbed that fence."

Billy, who had stood manfully at his post on the upturned bucket, had realized the necessity of feeding the waning fire. He had done this with his usual zeal, and the flames shot high.

"Oh, Jack, the apple butter! I forgot!"

"I love you all the more, dear, for remembering the apple butter," answered Jack ecstatically, and with his arm about her they sped down the path.

Billy was on his pail again, but the wavering movement of the stick was eloquent of his tired arms. This he would not admit.

"I ain't a bit tired. But you look mighty funny. I wasn't a hurryin' you," he said, glancing at Jack's misplaced arm.

Jack threw his head back and laughed.

"Billy, Lucy is mine now."

"For never 'n' never?"

“For good and aye.”

“Why could n’t you have asked her before me?”

“I was afraid she would n’t have me.”

“Yes, she would,” he said confidently.

“How do you know?”

“Because she always stuck up for you so.”

“What did she say? Tell me every word Billy.”

“She did n’t say anything. She jus’ stuck. You always did like our family purty well, did n’t you?”

“Yes, Lucy first, and you next. We’ll be like brothers now.”

“No. Lucy is my cousin. You’ll be my cousin. Cousins can git purty thick — and drive one another’s horses,” added Billy, thoughtfully.

“Sure enough, and you must have a pony,” replied Jack, in the generosity of his happiness.

“There, it is done,” said Lucy. Together they swung the pot from its moorings.

"You owe no divided allegiance now. Come."

Jack led her to the settee and sat down on the upturned pail at her feet.

Billy was stretched out on the settee at full length, but he carefully got himself down.

"You an' Lucy can hol' hands and I'll burn up the rest of the chips," he said politely, and with consideration.

Jack took both of her hands in his and bent over them.

"Will you have to do whatever she asks?" inquired Billy, intent on piling up the blazing chips, and without turning.

"Yes, and I expect you to do it."

"Oh, that's nothing. She does n't ask much."

"There you are, you limb," exclaimed a voice from the kitchen door. "You've scared me out of a year's growth. Oh, an' you're here too," Aunt Kiz said to Jack, who rose from his low seat.

"Yes. I could n't support the thought of you and Miss Dyer and Sister Bergan dancing a

war dance around the Martin bonfire over my discomfiture. But Lucy has comforted me."

"I only went to take Billy, en' you know it. But, Jack, it was as good as a theayter. It was your bonfire as much as if you 'd built it."
"That 's a nice way out."

"In fac' it 's a good thing I went, or I'd never a known what a fine young man you are. It was as good as readin' your obituary. Everybody was a-talkin'. Anna was there, sassin' right an' left, and Will Triplow started up that campaign song of his, an' the whole crowd joined in. But I don' believe you care."
Jack was looking down into Lucy's eyes.
"What does it mean?" Aunt Kiz gazed about her. "There 's somethin' more here than kittles of apple butter."

"Dear Aunt Kiz," said Lucy, nestling under her arm.

Jack bent down and drew Lucy toward him.
"She is mine now; mine to protect and defend." He closed his arms around her.

"Lucy!" she exclaimed.

Lucy did not answer, but folded her hands confidently around Jack's arm.

The old woman's eyes swam with tears.

"Yes," said Billy, "and I kept the apple butter from burning while Jack kissed her."

Aunt Kiz turned, and swooping down upon Billy, clasped him in her arms and covered him with caresses.

THE END

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HUMPHREY / S. MARY, GAY

